MARCH

Famous FANTASTIC Mysteries

25¢

CONCLUDING--
INTO THE INFINITE
by AUSTIN HALL

ARK OF FIRE
by JOHN HAWKINS
A SENSATIONAL COMPLETE NOVEL

GIVE WAR BONDS AND STAMPS

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PRAISE THE LORD

"I TALKED WITH GOD"

DR. FRANK B. ROBINSON
Founder "Psychiana"
Moscow, Idaho

and as a result of that little talk with God a strange Power came into my life. For I discovered that when a man finds the dynamic, invisible Power which is God, that man possesses a priceless heritage. Failure, fear, confusion go out of the life, and in the place of these things, there comes a sweet assurance that the Power which created the universe is at the disposal of all. And life takes on a brighter hue when the fact is fully known that at any hour of the day or night the amazing Power of Almighty God can be thrown against any and all undesirable circumstances—and they disappear.

Before I talked with God, I was perhaps the world's No. 1 failure. And then, when the future seemed hopeless indeed, I TALKED WITH GOD. And now?—well, I am president of the corporation which publishes the largest circulating afternoon newspaper in North Idaho. I own the largest office building in my home town—Moscow, Idaho. I have a wonderful home which has a beautiful pipe-organ in it, and I have several other holdings too. Now something very definite happened in my life, and it is this very definite thing I want you to know about. It can happen to you too.

If you will send me your name and address now, I'll send you two FREE booklets which tell you what happened to me when I talked with God. You will learn from these two booklets where I talked with God, and what I said to God. As I say, these booklets are quite free and there is no obligation whatsoever incurred by sending for them.

BUT SEND NOW—while you are thinking about it. The address is "PSYCHIANA," Inc., Dept. 121, Moscow, Idaho. This may easily be the turning-point in your whole life. Here is the address again: "PSYCHIANA," Inc., Dept. 121, Moscow, Idaho. The prophecy mentioned below is also FREE.

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Ten years ago Dr. Robinson predicted this war. He told what nations would be lined up against other nations. He predicted the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. The prophecy came true in a remarkable manner NOW—he makes another astounding prophecy. How long will the war last? Which side will be victorious? How will Hitler and Hirohito meet their doom? Will Tokyo go up in flames? A FREE COPY of this amazing prophecy will be included if you mail your request—NOW. We cannot promise to repeat this offer. SO SEND NOW. You might just as well begin to use the invisible superhuman Power of God right tonight—right in your own home. The address again is "Psychiana," Inc., Dept. 121, Moscow, Idaho.

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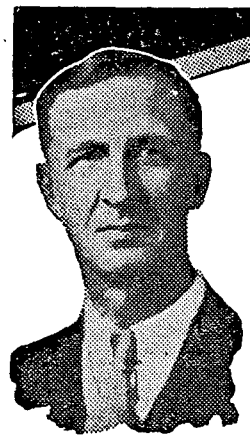

J. E. SMITH
President
National Radio Institute
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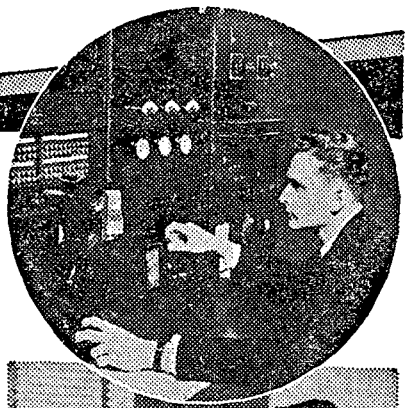
I WILL SEND A SAMPLE LESSON FREE

to PROVE I can Train You at Home in Spare Time to

BE A RADIO TECHNICIAN



BROADCASTING STATIONS (top illustration) employ Radio Technicians as *operators, installation,* maintenance men and in other fascinating, steady, well-paying technical jobs. FIXING RADIO SETS, (*bottom illustration*) a booming field today, pays many Radio Technicians $30, $40, $50 a week. Others hold their regular jobs *and make* $5 to $10 a week extra, fixing Radios in spare time.

I Trained These Men

$200 a Month in Own Business

"For several years I have been in business for myself making around $200 a month. Business has steadily increased. I have N. R. I. to thank for my start in this field." ARLIE J. FROEHNER, 300 W. Texas Ave., Goose Creek, Texas.

Lieutenant in Signal Corps

"I cannot divulge *any information* as to my type of work but *I can say that* N. R. I. training is certainly coming in mighty handy these days." (Name and address omitted for military reasons.)

$5 to $10 Week in Spare Time

"I am engaged *in spare time* Radio work. I average from $5 to $10 a week. I often wished that I had enrolled sooner because all this extra money sure does come in handy." THEODORE K. DuBREE, Horsham, Pa.

Extra Pay in Army, Navy, Too

Men likely to go into military service, soldiers, sailors, marines, should mail the coupon now! Learning Radio helps men get extra rank, extra prestige, more interesting duties, MUCH HIGHER PAY. Also prepares for good Radio jobs after service ends. Hundreds of service men now enrolled.

Mail the Coupon for a FREE lesson from my Radio Course. It shows you how N. R. I. trains you for Radio at home in spare time. And with this sample lesson I'll send my 64-page illustrated book, RICH REWARDS in RADIO. It describes the many fascinating jobs Radio offers. Explains how N. R. I. *teaches you* with interesting, illustrated lessons and SIX BIG KITS OF RADIO PARTS!

Act Now! Many Radio Technicians Make $30, $40, $50 a Week

Right now, in nearly every neighborhood, there's room for more spare and full time Radio Technicians. Many Radio Technicians are stepping into FULL time Radio jobs, or starting their own shops, and making $30, $40, $50 *a week!*

Others are taking good-pay jobs with Broadcasting Stations. Hundreds more are needed for Government jobs as Civilian Radio Operators, Technicians. Radio Manufacturers, rushing to fill Government orders, need trained men. Aviation, Police, Commercial Radio and Loudspeaker Systems are live, growing fields. And think of the NEW jobs Television and *other* Radio developments will open after the war! I give you the Radio knowledge required for these fields.

My "50-50 Method" Helps Many Make $5, $10 a Week Extra While Learning

Many N. R. I. Students make $5, $10 a week extra money fixing Radios in spare time while learning. I send EXTRA MONEY JOB SHEETS that tell how to do it!

My "50-50 Method"—half building and testing Radio circuits with the six kits of Radio *parts I send, half learning from illustrated* lessons—makes you "old friends" with Radio before you know it. You run your own spare *time shop, get practice fixing friends' Radios, get paid* while training!

Find out What N. R. I. Can do for You

MAIL COUPON NOW for FREE sample Lesson and 64-page illustrated book. You'll see the many fascinating jobs Radio offers and how *you* can train at home. If you want to *jump your pay*—Mail Coupon AT ONCE. J. E. SMITH, *President, Dept. 3BS9, National Radio* Institute, Washington, D. C.

TRAINING MEN FOR VITAL RADIO JOBS

Mail Coupon Now!

This FREE BOOK has Helped Hundreds of Men to Make More Money

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Mail me FREE, without obligation, your Sample Lesson and 64-page book, "Rich Rewards in Radio." (No Salesman will call. Please write plainly.)

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Famous FANTASTIC Mysteries

25¢

VOL. V MARCH, 1943 No. 3

Full Book-Length Novel

Ark of Fire — **John Hawkins** — 12

They were the last of their kind to whom the dying Earth could look for help, as it plunged headlong into the sun. Could two brave young men outwit the mad scientific genius whose warped brain was intent upon "purging" the world with a second Flood—of water and fire?

First Magazine Rights purchased from the author.

Serial

Into the Infinite — **Part Four (Conclusion)** — **Austin Hall** — 114

Titanic forces poise themselves for the final struggle to possess the Rebel Soul. Will the strange secret of his being now reveal itself in the clash of the loosed lightnings?

Published serially in All-Story Weekly, April 12, 1919.

Features

The Readers' Viewpoint 6

In the Next Issue 101

The New Finlay Portfolio 111

The Editor's Page 113

All Stories in this publication, with the exception of the concluding installment of "Into the Infinite," are either new or have never appeared in a magazine. For "Into the Infinite," please see footnote on page 114.

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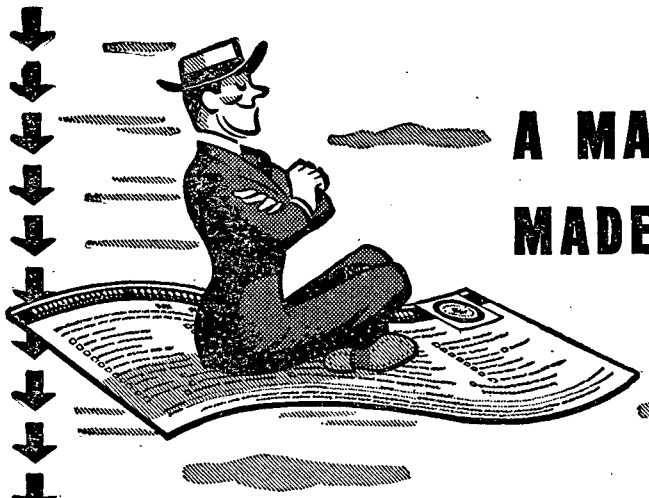

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The Readers' Viewpoint

Address comments to the Letter Editor, Famous Fantastic Mysteries, Popular Publications, 205 East 42nd st., New York City.

ABOUT THE "INFINITE"

Dear Editor:

"Into the Infinite" is not only the best story you have printed in the year 1942, but it is by far the greatest of Austin Hall's wonderful works.

If it's of any interest to you, this is the way I rate the Hall stories you have printed:

1. "Into the Infinite."
2. "The Blind Spot." While due credit must be given Mr. Flint for chapters nineteen through twenty-seven, Hall wrote the finest part of this story and carries off full honors.
3. "Almost Immortal." This story, printed way back in your second issue, is one of those tales which never seem long enough.
4. "The Rebel Soul." Although merely a forerunner to the main story—"Into the Infinite"—this novelette has enough interest and good writing to stand on its own feet as a self-sufficient classic.
5. "The Man Who Saved the Earth." In the hands of another author, this story would have been purest hack. In Hall's, due to the magnificent characterization, and the usual good writing, it is great.
6. "The Spot of Life." This would have rated much higher except for three facts. First, despite its length of over 50.000 words, it was too compressed. Second, there was too much of the same old thing—too much repetition of "The Blind Spot." And finally, the wholesale massacre of the "Blind Spot" characters somehow went against the grain. (If this be treason, et cetera—) As for illustrations, the best one remains "The Ring" for "The Blind Spot." Second, "George Witherspoon" for "The Rebel Soul." But, then, all were good, so why split hairs?

PAUL CARTER.

156 S. UNIVERSITY AVE.,
BLACKFOOT, IDAHO

DATED OCT. 20, 1942

In today's mail, there came, with the editor's compliments, three copies of FAMOUS FANTASTIC MYSTERIES—the August, September and October issues—pristine in their newness. It is easy for me to convey my personal thanks. But the thanks of the many that will eventually read these copies—that, unfortunately, is hard to send you. Of their popularity you may rest assured. I remember almost a year ago, while I was still in the States, the argument I had with one pilot, who had stocked himself up with this type of fiction to while away his boredom (?) while coming here. At that time, of course, we didn't know where we were going. As a matter of fact, we didn't until we got here. But some of those copies are still in Java. One went to the Philippines. We hope eventually to be in a position to recover them.

Putting in twelve to fifteen hours a day leaves very little time for relaxation, even of a time-and-place-forgetting sort. I should like to tell you of the many and varied places I have seen Fantastic Mysteries; of the Finlay illustrations tacked up in bush camps. I have never seen a magazine thrown away. They are literally worn out through reading. Chaps who come in from other places, snatch at my reserve copies eagerly. Two chaps who have won the D.S.C. are a couple of my most annoying seekers-after-science-fiction. The psychological effect of these stories is something to be also given consideration.

As for myself, I have read them for over twenty years, back to the days when I used to collect old issues of Cavaliers—the days of All-Story and George Allan England, when a Merritt story was almost the magazine, and when Ralph Milne Farley didn't have a Finlay or a Hannes Bok to give picturization to his wandering dreams that all of us have had and have not been able to capture in that same magic fashion. These magazines are not available in Australia, although copies of their style have at times been purchaseable in the cities from one-and-six to two bob (.25 to .32). I shall ration these out as one does library books, until more come in, and then their predecessors will gain greater glory in a more isolated circulation.

My thanks to you.

Sincerely,
MAJOR NICHOLAS KANE, A. C.
SOMEWHERE IN AUSTRALIA

WANTS FINLAY PORTFOLIO

Is there any possibility of my securing a copy of the Finlay portfolio which apparently your magazine has already published?

I am an ardent collector of this master fantasy artist, but I must have been sleeping when such a portfolio was published. Imagine my dismay upon reading on your "Editor's Page" of the December issue that the "second Finlay portfolio" will be issued in 1943.

If you still have same available, would you please advise me of the cost and I will hasten to purchase one? Or maybe I'm just too optimistic.

Please do all possible to aid me in securing a copy of the original one issued and you will greatly oblige an avid fan.

JOHN W. MULLER.

1409 GERVAIS ST.,
COLUMBIA, S. C.

(Continued on page 8)

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15 Minutes a Day!

Give me just this and I'll prove I can make you

A NEW MAN!

I'M "trading-in" old bodies for new! I'm taking men who know that the condition of their arms, shoulders, chests and legs—their strength, "wind," and endurance—is not 100%. And I'm making NEW MEN of them. *Right now* I'm even training hundreds of soldiers and sailors who KNOW they've got to get into shape FAST!

How do YOU measure up for the defense of your country? Have YOU the strong shoulders and back that can haul for miles Uncle Sam's standard *61 pounds* of Army man's equipment? Or if home defense presses you into service, have you the he-man strength and tireless energy that double-shifts of working and watching may call for?

Charles Atlas

—actual photo of the man who holds the title, "The World's Most Perfectly Developed Man."

Now as Never Before You Need a Body That's Ready for ANY Job in National Emergency!

Are you ALL MAN—tough-muscled, on your toes every minute, with all the up-and-at-'em that can lick your weight in wildcats? *Or do you want the help I can give you*—the help that has already worked such wonders for other fellows, everywhere?

All the world knows I was ONCE a skinny, 97-lb. weakling. And NOW it knows I won the title, "The World's Most Perfectly Developed Man." Against all comers! How did I do it? How do I work miracles in the bodies of other men in such quick time? The answer is *"Dynamic Tension"!*

In just 15 minutes a day, right in the privacy of your own home, I'm ready to prove that *"Dynamic Tension"* can lay a new outfit of solid muscle over every inch of your body. Let me put new, smashing power into your arms and shoulders—give you an armor-shield of stomach muscle that laughs at punches—strengthen your legs into real columns of surging stamina. If lack of exercise or wrong living has weakened you *inside*, I'll get after that condition, too, and show you how it feels to LIVE!

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Among all the physical instructors and "conditioners of men" ONLY ONE NAME STANDS OUT—Charles Atlas!

THAT is the name immediately thought of by men who WANT to attain a physique that will withstand hardship and strain, ready for any possible emergency, personal or national.

In every part of the country Charles Atlas is recognized as "America's Greatest Builder of Men." Almost two million men have written to him. Thousands upon thousands have put their physical development into his capable hands!

And now that the call is for men capable of helping America meet and conquer any national emergency, many thousands of others, even those already in their country's Army and Navy, are calling upon Charles Atlas to build the kind of men America vitally needs!

FREE This Famous Book That Tells You How to Get a Body That Men Respect and Women Admire

Almost two million men have sent for and read my book, *"Everlasting Health and Strength."* It tells you exactly what *"Dynamic Tension"* can do. And it's packed with pictures that SHOW you what it does. RESULTS it has produced for other men. RESULTS I want to prove it can get for YOU! If you are satisfied to take a back seat and be pushed around by other fellows week-in, week-out, you don't want this book. But if you want to learn how you can actually become a NEW MAN, right in the privacy of your own home and in only 15 minutes a day, then man!—get this coupon into the mail to me as fast as your legs can get to the letterbox! CHARLES ATLAS, Dept. 832, 115 East 23rd St., New York, N. Y.

MAIL THIS COUPON NOW!

CHARLES ATLAS, Dept. 832,
115 East 23rd St., New York, N. Y.

I want the proof that your system of "Dynamic Tension" will help make a New Man of me—give me a healthy, husky body and big muscular development. Send me your free book, "Everlasting Health and Strength."

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(Please print or write plainly)

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(Continued from page 6)

The first Finlay Portfolio is sold out. Perhaps some of the readers have extra ones. The new one is available now.

"THE GOLDEN CITY" PERFECT

I have been a reader of Science Fiction and Fantasy Fiction for quite a while, but I am sorry to say that FAMOUS FANTASTIC MYSTERIES has been a long time coming to my attention. The first issue I ever read was December. The story "The Golden City," by Farley, was perfect with a capital "P." Not having read the first two installments of "Into the Infinite," I was not able to fully appreciate the serial, but what I read of it was very good. The illustrations by Finlay are beyond expression! He has always been my favorite artist (of Sf. and Fantasy) and always will be.

ROBERT BENEDICT.

96 EAST UTICA ST.,
BUFFALO, N. Y.

WANTS NEW PORTFOLIO

Enclosed is a money order and my request for your magazine, starting with the November issue.

"Into the Infinite" with George Witherspoon, by author Austin Hall, is one of the most beautiful fantastic love stories I have ever had the privilege of reading; perhaps due to my belief that such a love as that can overcome everything in this world. So, I would not miss the next installment of "Into the Infinite" for all the tea in China.

You have a great magazine. I have yet to read a bad story by any of your authors. A friend started me to reading your famous magazine and although I am just a newcomer, I am truly sincere in my praise of it.

The covers and illustrations by Virgil Finlay are masterpieces. If you ever offer any more of his drawings suitable for framing, please inform me. I shall be only too glad to purchase them at any time. The first set was wonderful. Here's hoping you continue to print the best stories. Wishing you continued success and luck in bringing to the public such marvelous, out of the ordinary trend, magazine stories.

MRS. JAMES L. ANTONINE.

541 HOBART ST., APT. 15,
OAKLAND, CALIF.

DEC. ISSUE TOPS

Allow me to voice my opinion of the Dec. '42 issue of F.F.M. It's the finest Science Fiction magazine that I have ever read. The cover was very good; quite typical of Finlay. More covers by Finlay with a dash of Paul. Please do not enlarge your staff of artists. These two are quite sufficient. They far outrank many of the other Science Fiction artists, with the exception of Wesso, Bergey and Fuqua.

I must say that your S. F. mag is conducive to the growth of S. F. fans. F.F.M. stands out like Saturn's rings.

For a story with sustained interest, "The Golden City" tops them all. I won't say a word about "Into the Infinite." It speaks for itself.

I notice that The Reader's Viewpoint has been enlarged. Keep it so.

I hope F.F.M. can maintain the high standard it has set, for, let me repeat again, it is the best S. F. mag that is being published.

RICHARD S. HIRSCHFELD.

SAN FRANCISCO, CALIF.

DEC. COVER BEAUTIFUL

I have just purchased the December, 1942 issue of F.F.M., and want you to know that the cover was the most beautiful I have ever seen on any science-fiction or fantasy magazine—or any other kind of mag, for that matter.

Finlay's interpretation of "The Golden City" is simply exotic. The figure and the pier in the foreground are both wonderful, but nothing could be as beautiful as that city!

It seems a shame, though, that the lettering had to mar the painting. Why don't you stick to the formula used on the cover of the October issue, which had a panel at the bottom of the page?

I also beg for a reprinting of "The Ark of Fire."

And now I'm going to suggest something that may seem utterly silly, but nevertheless, it shall never be said that Missouri's Gift to Science-Fiction ever hesitated to stick his neck out.

I am going to ask that you reprint such gems of fantasy as "Dracula," Mary Shelly's famous "Frankenstein" (a very engrossing s-f tale), and the story of King Kong, if such a novel was ever written.

(Groans, snickers, cat-calls and hisses from the ranks of rank fandom at this point). But anyway, I would like to see what Finlay could do with the monster or the vampire. Think it over.

I side with the many fans who beg you not to polute F.F.M. with any other artist's work save Paul and Finlay.

Thanks for the many hours of entertainment you have given me, and for the beautiful Finlay covers.

E. W. ("GENE") HUNTER.

616 E. MCCARTY AVE.,
JEFFERSON CITY, MO.

"ARK OF FIRE" REQUESTED

Every month at the time your magazine reaches the newsstands, I tell myself I am going to write a letter in praise. And every month, for one reason or another, I put it off. Now at last, in one of my rare moments of leisure, I set myself to write you regarding several items I deem important.

First, may I say with a rather jubilant expression that your magazine is considered by myself and several of my friends as one of the finest. May I issue my sincerest thanks for

(Continued on page 10)

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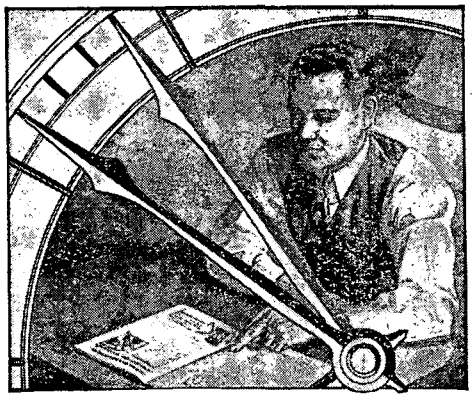

How Do You Use The Most Important Hours of Your Day?

The most important—and they can be the most profitable, too. Men—ordinary men in ordinary circumstances—have had returns of as high as $5, $10, $25, even in exceptional cases $50 per hour for these hours.

They are the hours of your leisure time—usually spent in recreation or odds and ends.

These can be your growth hours, the time when through training you can prepare for more efficient service on the job or for the job ahead. During your working hours, you are usually buried in routine details, growing slowly if at all. But in these spare hours, your mind can reach out to absorb the experience of others, to learn the principles and methods behind your job and behind your field. The next day on the job, you will find yourself using something of what you learned the night before to the benefit of your job and the pleasure of your boss.

Interestingly enough, this spare time study can be fascinating recreation, not drudgery. And the few minutes spent this way tone up the remaining hours of your leisure—make them more interesting.

WHAT CAN THEY MEAN TO YOU?

We can't say exactly. But we can tell you what they have meant to thousands of others. They have brought to these men and women promotions, new jobs, more money and prestige, greater success and happiness, security for the future. If these are the things you want, we invite your investigation of LaSalle home study training.

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(Continued from page 8)

using as illustrators only two artists, of whom both are excellent, and never tiring. Please use no others, as Finlay and Paul give to your magazine a perfect blending of science and fantasy in the best form possible.

Here also is my vote for reprinting "The Ark of Fire."

WILLIAM F. HOMES.

1633 DUNLAVY,
HOUSTON, TEXAS

F.F.M. A LEADER

It has been some time since I last commented on F.F.M., but this has not been because of lack of interest. This magazine has been the natural leader in its field since its inception. Every fantasy fan owes you an undying debt of gratitude to the editors for making classics of past years available to the fans of today. And Paul and Finlay! Words fail me when it comes to describing their vivid and thrilling illustrations. They literally transport us beyond space and time. My favorite tale? You guessed it. "The Moon Pool."

In my opinion, that is supreme fantasy of them all. The best of luck to F.F.M. May it continue to grow and grow, until it is necessary to make it a weekly. I am a reader for life.

GERARD LERNER.

266 CRANDELL AVE.,
YOUNGSTOWN, OHIO

"ARK OF FIRE" FAN

May I add my vote for: The Skylark series; The Ark of Fire; The Queen of Life; Kline's Swordsman of Mars and Outlaws of Mars; But not the Beyer ARGOSY "Minions" series.

They are much too recent—just appeared in Argosy not long ago. What can John Rouse be thinking of? There are very many wonderful old classics waiting to appear in (re-)print.

Sincerely yours,
J. WASSO, JR.

119 JACKSON AVE.,
Pen Argyl, Pa.

WANT TO TRADE?

I have been reading F.F.M. and F.N. since the full-length novel policy began in July, 1940. F.F.M. is all right—well worth 25c. I would like to suggest that you do not publish serials in more than two instalments.

The December cover is an example for all future covers. Finlay is perfect.

I have seven issues containing the Moon Pool by A. Merritt and will be willing to discuss trading. Also have Argosy excerpts—"Minions of the Moon; of Mercury; of Mars," which I will trade.

JACOB ELENTIO.

4103 16th AVE.,
BROOKLYN, N. Y.

ONE OF THE GIRLS

I first read FAMOUS FANTASTIC MYSTERIES about a year ago. One day I was wandering through a second-hand book store, looking for something good to read, when I accidentally knocked a copy of F.F.M. off a shelf. I picked it up and decided to take a chance. I enjoyed that issue so much I've been buying the magazine ever since.

The fans around here don't seem to want to let go of their back issues so I can't complete my file. I would like to get in touch with fantasy and science fiction fans in and near Houston. I am 19 years old and like to read, swim, ride, and collect fantasy mags.

I think F.F.M. is the best book of its kind on the market. I would like to suggest a few of my pet ideas for the improvement of an already perfect mag. How about answering the questions the fans ask in the letters? Please make the Reader's Viewpoint long every issue. Give us some articles about the authors and artists. And I like to see an Editor's page with forecasts in each issue.

A faithful reader,
MISS MARCIA KEMPER.

1102 LA BRANCH ST., APT. 1,
HOUSTON, TEXAS

LIKED "DEMOISELLE D'YS"

I'm taking a little time off from my studies here at Rutgers University to scribble off this note.

I just want to say:

(1) "Mouthpiece of Zitu" was very good; better than "Palos." It was of course too wordy and flowery at times; but still good enough for my two bits. Cover and drawings were very good.

(2) "Into the Infinite" was good, but I can see that it is not of "Blind Spot" quality. In some respects "The Rebel Soul" was superior. But . . . it's still O.K.

(3) "The Demoiselle d'Ys"—very good. Print all of "The King In Yellow."

(4) Have a poetry page with heading "cut"—a Finlay or Bok drawing. Speaking of Bok, let's have some work by him! He's really good!

(5) Put in an editor's page. This is really a necessity!

(6) Reprint, soon and by all means:
"The Ark of Fire"

(7) Have some more Finlay art interpretations.

BEN INDICK.

100 EATON AVE.,
BRUNSWICK, N. J.

1940 ISSUE WANTED

First, to get my burning question off my chest before I go further. Do you have, by any chance, the November, 1940 issue of F.F.M. in your files? Or if not there, can you advise me through your "Letters to the Editor" column of any fan who might supply it?

(Continued on page 140)

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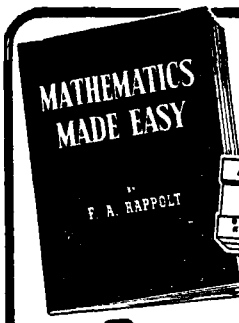

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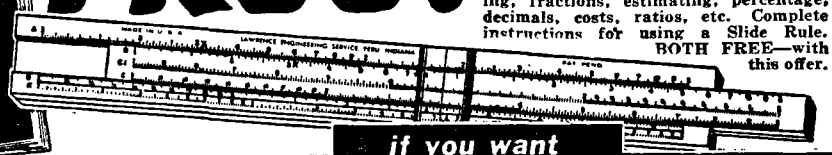

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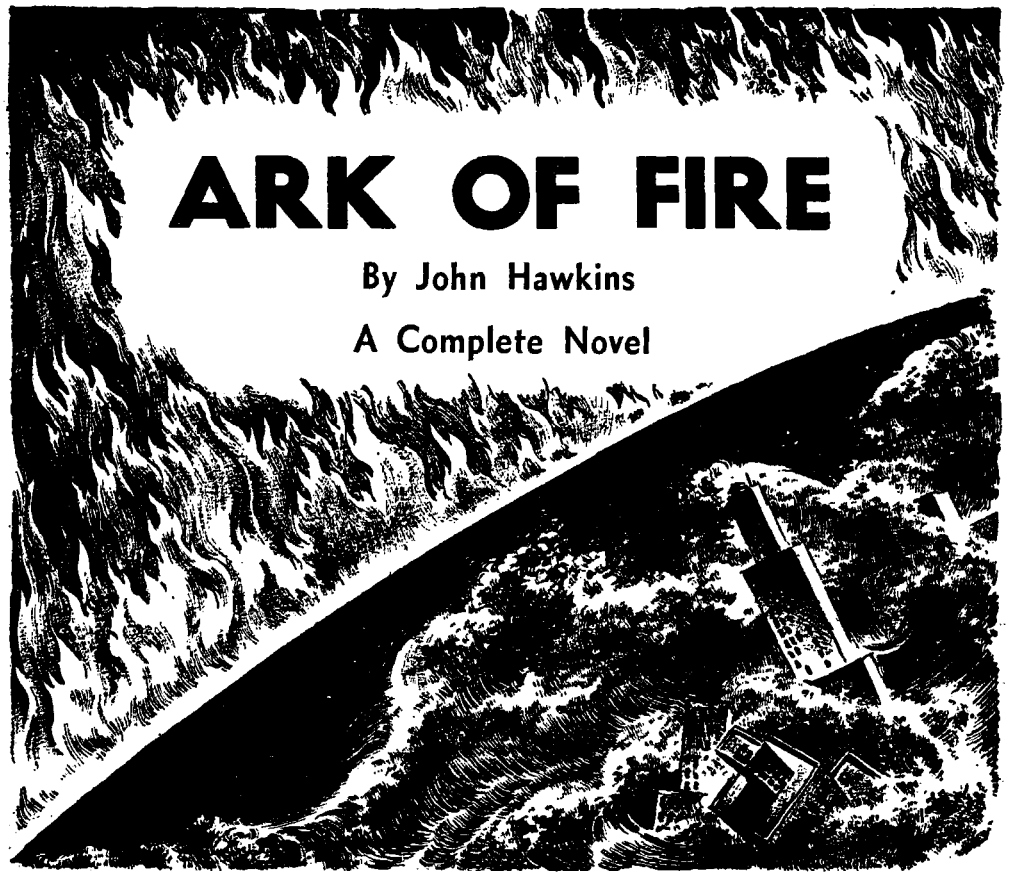

ARK OF FIRE

By John Hawkins

A Complete Novel

They were the last of their kind to whom the dying Earth could look for help, as it plunged headlong into the sun. Could two brave young men outwit the mad scientific genius whose warped brain was intent upon "purging" the world with a second Flood—of water and fire?

CHAPTER I

A GLIMPSE AT MURDER

THE silver-winged sport plane was still fifty miles south of Manhattan's gleaming skyline when Steven Hill's eyes flicked to the instrument panel. Altitude 6,000; air-speed 350. Right.

A fragment of the Air Code—1980 Issue—ran through his head: "No plane shall land on any metropolitan roof without first having secured permission from the dispatcher thereon. Southbound air traffic shall at all times. . . ."

Steven Hill turned to the man in the seat beside him.

"Better get landing clearance, Jay. I'll take her in."

Jay Forbes' smile flashed white against the sun-darkened skin of his face.

"You wouldn't pick the easy job, Steve? You know that landing on 124 is like crashing Heaven."

Steven Hill grinned. "With a crate like this—right."

Forbes was speaking then, his lips only inches from the microphone. "Calling roof one-two-four. Bell Sportwing, northbound at six-thousand-foot level, calling

First magazine rights purchased from the author

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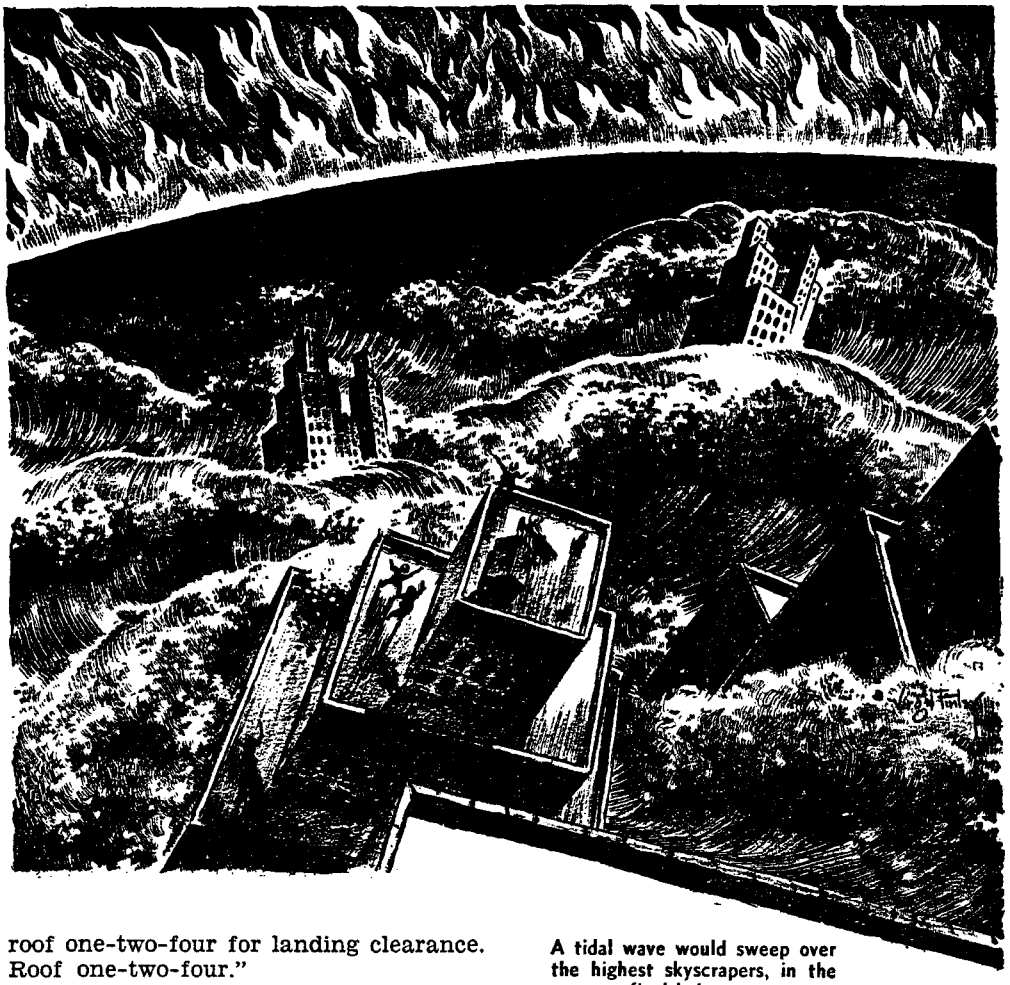

A tidal wave would sweep over the highest skyscrapers, in the final holocaust

roof one-two-four for landing clearance. Roof one-two-four."

The speaker hissed, spluttered, and then crisp words came into the cabin. "Bell Sportwing. Roof one-two-four speaking. Come in. Wait until transport clears, and then use number three lane."

"Right," Forbes said, "we're coming in." He switched the microphone off, and then set the standard receiver on the government wave length. "Easy stuff, Steve, when you know how."

"Sure, but have that pass ready when the wheels stop rolling, or the dispatcher will flag us out just as fast as this ship will move."

Steven Hill closed the throttle, waited until the air speed had dropped to ninety, and then nosed the ship down. The needle flickered upward again as the ship slanted through the hot, bright sunlight toward the flat roof that bore the numerals 124.

At twenty-five hundred feet Hill flattened his glide to cross well above the southbound freight lane. On the roof the big transport had just cleared the elevator hoods, and was waddling down lane three. Hill put the plane in a lazy bank.

Tricky, this, for thousands of other ships shuttled back and forth above Manhattan. Below them, dusty gray freighters lumbered along at two hundred; and far to the right a huge yellow-winged, over-weather transport from the Transatlantic run came in for a landing.

Others — countless others — streamed across the afternoon sky. Sleekly scarlet police ships; dull red official helos; near-white military ships, and private planes —blue, yellow, green, brown—in a rainbow of living color.

The speaker said: "Okay, Bell Sportwing, come in."

Hill took the plane in with sure swiftness, wheeling on one wing tip, and dropping in a breathless rush till the marking lines of lane three ran white and wide

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on either side. Then, the wing flaps checked their forward rush, the wheel brakes took hold, and Hill swung the ship in a tight half-circle just short of the crash fence.

A white-jumpered mechanic met the plane as it taxied under the elevator hoods. "The dispatcher wants you to check in at the desk."

A uniformed official inspected the cards which the two men placed on the desk in front of him. "Very correct, gentlemen. You understand, of course, that we must be careful—we've barely enough hangar space for planes that belong here. Any of the elevators on your right stop at the eighty-sixth floor."

Hill and Forbes left the desk. Behind them the speaker horns said in a giant's voice: "The Bell Sportwing goes in Hangar 'A'."

Hill glanced at his watch as the elevator door opened. "The one o'clock bulletin is due."

Forbes nodded. "Yes. We can hear it in the waitingroom."

Forbes was right. They had just reached the office of the Universal Newscasting Service when the wall grids of the standard receiving sets glowed red, and the precise voice of the government announcer came into the room:

"Washington D.C.: March fourteenth, nineteen hundred and eighty; One p.m. The heat wave continued today, while experts searched weather records for a hundred years back in a vain attempt to account for the near-tropical temperatures. The death list reach a new high in the Midwest when the thermometer touched one hundred and twenty-eight degrees. Dust storms swept the northwest—a thing that had not happened since nineteen hundred and fifty. . . ."

"Come on," Forbes said harshly, "we haven't got much time." He pivoted, led the way across the tiled foyer.

The clipped voice followed them down the long hall:

". . . Atlantic City reports forty-five dead in yesterday's gale which was accompanied by the highest tide ever recorded on the Atlantic coast. Other coastal cities. . . ."

"This way, gentlemen." A door had slipped soundlessly away in what had appeared to be unbroken wall, and a page boy appeared. "You are to wait here."

A moment later the door had closed again, and the two men were alone in the small lounge.

STEVEN HILL grinned across the room at Forbes. "One more step and we're there, mister. If you know any fancy speeches you'd better dust them off because U.N.S. doesn't throw their jobs around."

Hill was tall—a lean, slim-hipped man who had a natural, cat-smooth ease of movement. Well-tailored white set off the spread of his shoulders, and the bronze of his weather-darkened face. He wore no hat and his hair showed sun-bleached, almost white.

"Speeches," Forbes growled, "speeches. Yes, an' me with a voice that gives a mike the shudders. I step up and say my little bit, and blow tubes in every screen in three countries. No thanks, I'll leave the speeches to you. That's not my job. I want to get my hands on one of these new outfits—one of these portable jobs that'll pick up anything from a transport crack-up to a fly on a lump of sugar—and put them both on the receiving screens, in color."

"You'll get the job, Jay. They can't ignore your record."

"I hope you're right." Forbes dug thick fingers through tousled black hair. "Look," he said mournfully, "I spend my last hundred dollars on these clothes, and they look as if they came from a Second Avenue pawnshop."

A full head shorter than Hill, Forbes weighed ten pounds more. He was a bull-necked, stocky man, whose lumpy shoulders defied any tailor's art, but whose big fingered hands possessed amazing skill. As a college freshman he had astounded his instructors by assembling a color screen from laboratory parts, after reading the technical description in a magazine.

"I hope," Forbes repeated, "I hope you're right."

Neither man spoke after that. Nervous perspiration ran cold down Hill's back. Too much depended on this interview. Too damn much!

Four years of college. Four years of hoping, of work and study. Long hours of night work in the labs to get the grade points that meant top class standing, for Universal took only honor men. Four years, and now it was on the lap of the gods!

Hill lit a cigarette, took a single drag, and ground the cigarette savagely in an ash tray.

Jay Forbes' face was shiny with sweat.

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"I need a drink," he whispered, "plenty bad. What the devil are we going to do if he turns us down? There's nobody else."

"We've still got Apex and World-Wide."

"Hell, Apex's got one outfit, and World-Wide is working with equipment that's older than we are. Why, their stuff's broadcast in black and white, and you should see the way the image bounces when the . . . ."

"Gentlemen," the voice came from the silver disc set flush in the wall, "Mr. Beck will see you now." .

Forbes pawed at his tousled hair as the speaker clicked silent, and an inner door slipped away revealing a short hall. Steven Hill shrugged his jacket flat across his shoulders. His voice was husky:

"Up, Jay, an' at 'em."

Hill led the way to the door.

Waves of sound came down the hall to meet them. Clamoring, discordant sound. There was the rumble of voices, the hissing boom of surf, and the high-pitched wail of a siren. Then, the sudden throb of plane motors, a burst of thunderous crowd sound, and the pound of marching feet.

Hill paused just inside the door until Forbes gained his side. Another second, and the two of them were striding down the great length of the room toward its sole occupant.

Magazines had pictured this room a thousand times since it had been built, and Hill and Forbes had talked of this moment since they'd seen the first picture. Each step had been planned. How they would swing through that door and, side by side, stride the length of the room, without once looking at the screens that lined the walls.

Giant screens, ten times the size of those on the commercial receivers, a full twelve feet square. Eight of them on each wall. One for each Universal Field Unit. Now, only one of those screens was blank. Each of the others was alive —stridently alive. Each, a fully colored, three-dimensional segment of life, made possible by the twin iscanascopes. History in the making—sixteen living pages of history as it happened.

Ten steps and Hill knew it was impossible. No man could walk the length of that room and keep his eyes away from those screens. Not the first time.

Here, ordered ranks of soldiers swept past a reviewing stand where the hawk-faced Boggio, Italy's Military Prince, stood stiffly at attention. The next screen showed only the depthless blue of a cloudless sky, and then a scarlet streak as a new speed plane cometed across that space in a try for the world's speed record.

Voices, sound, life—the control room of Universal Newscasting.

Hill's jerking eyes saw a storm wrecked coastal town on one screen, and the boiling yellow clouds of a dust storm on another. Then they were in front of the huge desk.

THE man behind that desk was no less famous than this room. Charles A. Beck, the father of all newscasters. His smooth, swift speech had covered the greatest news stories for the past forty years.

The War of Twelve Nations in 1950. Beck had reported the destruction of London by the great Oriental bombing fleet; had covered the last battle that raged across four countries in as many days. Beck it had been who first gave the details of the surrender, to the world.

Gray-haired, sallow-cheeked and old now, his thin, blue-veined hands did little more than move tiny control switches. But once Beck had carried a two hundred pound portable pick-up set into a hell of poison gas so that the watching world could see the horror of war.

A gangster had given him the scar across the bridge of his nose. That was when Beck had taken his iscanascope —ahead of the police—into a room where a kidnaped president of the United States had died.

The Treasury raids in 1955; the yellow invasion in 1963; the attempted revolution in 1969. Beck had seen and covered them all. Arctic exploration, riots, wars, they had been only grist for his mill, only a job. His exploits had done more to forward international peace than those of any other man. Beck, the first newscaster.

Now, he inclined his shaggy gray head a scant inch. "Just a moment, please."

They waited.

Beck's eyes had gone beyond them to that one gray and silent screen. A tiny switch moved under his thumb, and he half turned his head to speak into the microphone at his side.

"Pick it up, Mike."

A ticking instant, and that silent screen came to life. A man's head and shoulders

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flashed there—white against a dusty background—and a rich voice said, "No luck, Chief. We grounded just outside De Spain's headquarters here, but he won't make any statement. I'd like to bring him in, but hell, I can't scan through a couple of hundred feet of solid rock."

"There's no way you can get in?"

"Chief, I've tried everything. Bribery, flattery, force, and gate-crashing. All I got was a kick in the belly. This place's tougher to get into than the mint."

Beck's shoulders drooped, and he brushed one hand across his eyes. "Leave there at once, Mike. Try the Mount Wilson Observatory again. You've got to get in this time—got to!"

A wry smile pulled at the lips of the image on the screen. He nodded, said, "Right, Chief." The screen went dark at once.

Beck didn't move for a full minute, and then, as his finger moved along a row of toggle switches, all sound within the huge room stopped.

That silence seemed to stretch taut and thin before Beck's fierce blue eyes came up to meet theirs, and he said, "So you want to work for Universal?"

The answer came from both men at once: "Yes, sir!"

"The man you just heard"—Beck nodded at the dark screen—"was Mike James. He's our best man, our highest paid man. He'll get any story he goes after, if any human can get it. Yet, twice in the last week he's missed. Twice, he has failed utterly. In that week I'd say Mike has had about ten hours' sleep, and right now his crew are in the air again. They're flying back after a story they know they can't get. They'd have to take their iscanascopes past a solid wall of Delta guns. But they'll try to find a way—they're working for Universal!"

Beck's eyes glowed. "There are seventeen crews. No less than fourteen screens must be hot at any time. Ten million people in the United States pay for our service, and those people have their choice of six programs at any time. So you see, all the news comes into this room, but less than half of it is released. Even if Mike gets this story it can never be released. He knows that as well as I do."

"Then, why—" The involuntary question sprang from Hill's lips.

But if Beck heard he gave no sign. He opened a drawer, extracted a thick sheaf of papers. "Reports, gentlemen." He prodded the papers. "Reports gathered since you two filed your applications."

BECK picked up a card, read aloud:

> "Steven Hill, honor student in advanced communications. An orphan, whose father was a Civil Engineer. College expenses paid by De Spain scholarship."

The ice-blue eyes flicked again to Hill's face. "Do you know De Spain?" Beck asked.

"No, sir. Only what is common knowledge. My father once worked for him, but beyond that I know only what I've read, and—"

"Of course," Beck interrupted, "you know that all his damned inventions are named after letters in the Greek alphabet, and that the patents he controls amount to a monopoly on industry." He paused, "You're sure you haven't had an offer of any kind from him?"

"I have not."

Again Beck's scant nod. "He's called a lot of men into his headquarters who were trained on his scholarships." Beck swung half-round. "You, Forbes, your technical record is a bit outstanding, isn't it?"

Forbes gulped, reddened. "I—I was just lucky."

"That's the kind of luck Universal needs," Beck said. "Report here Monday morning, both of you. Mike James is invaliding two of his crew into the hospital then." A wintery note came into Beck's voice. "That's another thing. A Universal man spends a lot of time in hospitals."

Neither Hill nor Forbes spoke.

"You will be allowed fifty pounds of luggage, no more. You will get your instructions from the flying deck. That's all."

Hill said, "I'd like to thank you for . . . ."

Charles Beck wasn't listening. He was staring as if fascinated at a disc above the dark screen. A winking disc that glowed with an angry red. His hand flashed to the bank of switches, and he snapped:

"Pick it up!"

Again the head and shoulders of a man appeared on that screen. A big man, whose face was marked with deep lines of exhaustion and pain. He swayed as he talked. His voice was a thin whisper.

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"Terry on crew six, Chief. George stopped a couple of Delta slugs getting out of the hospital where they took that mathematician from the Naval Observatory. George got in as an orderly, but he couldn't get the 'scope in with him. Chief, that old guy's either nuts or we got the biggest news story that ever broke, by the tail.

"George talked to the old guy for nearly an hour. He says this heat wave is something more than sunspots. It's—it's—" The big man pawed at his sweat-streaked face, went on in a faint, clouded voice. "They got George twice. He's—he's dead! But this is just the way he told it to me."

Beck was leaning forward. "Go on!"

"Chief, this is only the start. Hell, there's everything ahead. These high tides are nuthin'. Wait till you hear what's supposed to be coming. The whole State of Florida is goin' under! And the temperature's going up to . . . to. . . ." The big man choked, caught at his throat.

Beck had the microphone pulled close to his lips. "What is it, Terry? What's wrong? Speak, man."

"Here, Chief, I . . . I. . . ." Terry's big shoulders drooped forward. His lips moved, but only faint sound came out. *"Chief, here. . . ."*

The image on the screen swung, grew oddly tall, and vanished. The watching men saw a flash of blue sky; the marble face of a huge building, and then a second man.

He was an officer, clad in navy blue, his bronzed face grim under the bill of a white cap. Black metal glittered wickedly in his hand, the shining black of a Delta gun. Fat-barreled, compact—the deadliest small arm ever devised—the Delta gun could fire a hundred rounds in thirty seconds.

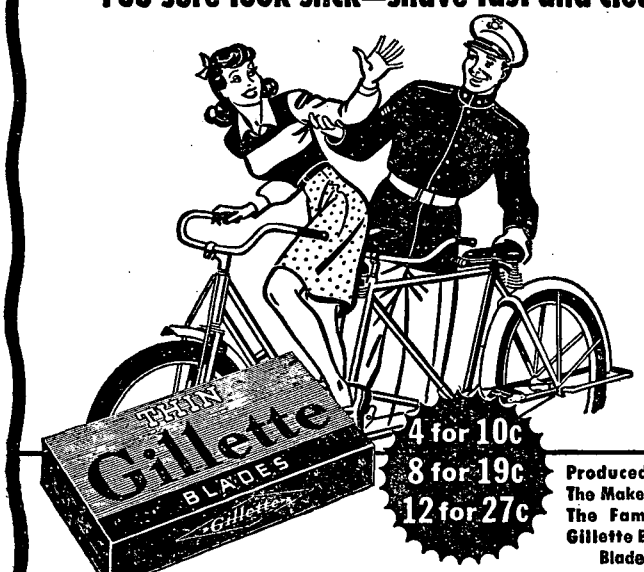
"Stop!" The officer's voice came plain and clear. "I told you what would happen if . . . ."

Thin, desperate words, "Chief, next week . . . ."

The officer said, "You fool; you damned fool!" The Delta gun spat a thin stream of bluish flame. The image on the screen whirled again till only blue sky showed there. Then suddenly—nothing!

They stared, for a breathless instant, at the slate gray of the empty screen. Beck's hot curse broke the tight silence. He was fumbling with the row of toggle

The man who's conservation-wise
Says Thin Gillette's the blade he buys!
It's thrifty, longer-lasting, keen—
You sure look slick—shave fast and clean!



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Produced By The Maker Of The Famous Gillette Blue Blade

Easy Way To Get Even More Shaves With Every Gillette Blade

1. WASH FACE thoroughly with hot water and soap to soften beard and eliminate accumulated grit that dulls shaving edges

2. APPLY LATHER or Brushless Shaving Cream while face is wet. If lather is used, dip your brush in water frequently

3. TWO EDGES double blade life. Marks indicated above identify edges, enabling you to give both equal use and get extra shaves

4. CLEAN BLADE in razor by loosening handle, then rinsing in hot water and shaking. Wiping the blade is likely to damage the edges

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switches then, snapping crisp words into the microphone.

"Lang, damn you, come to life! Lang. . . ."

The voice came from the desk speaker: "Right, Chief."

"Where've you been?" Beck straightened in his chair, and a husky note came into his voice. "Get the emergency crew in the air, at once! Crew Six ran into plenty of trouble. George Wane and Terry are both—both dead. I want reports every five minutes, and if that crew isn't on the ground in thirty minutes, tell them not to come back."

"Yes, sir!"

Beck's hand came away from the switch to brush at his lips. There were deep lines in his face that hadn't been there before. His eyes were shiny with thought.

He stared at Hill and Forbes as though realizing for the first time that he wasn't alone in the room. His voice was suddenly gruff.

"Get out of here! Your job doesn't start till Monday, and if you want to be sure you've got a job, keep what you heard to yourselves! Move!"

Steven Hill found Forbes at his side when he turned. They walked swiftly, silently back the way they had come.

A THOUSAND questions burned in Hill's mind as the elevator shot them roofward. Questions for which there were no answers. Terry had been murdered! There was no other name for what they had seen. And Terry's killer had worn a naval uniform!

Why? There had to be a reason for Terry's death. A good reason. That naval officer hadn't wanted to shoot; that had shone in his face. He must have been carrying out an order. Then what had Terry done? Had he and Wane stolen some government secret? Had he—hell, he'd talked about the weather and the tides. Nothing else. What answer, what possible answer, could there be?

They were passing the dispatcher's desk then, moving out into the full bright glare of the sun. Speaker horns behind them bellowed.

"Bell Sportwing out of Hangar 'A' for take-off in Lane Two."

Jay Forbes touched Hill's arm. "What's it all about, Steve? I saw it, but I—" His homely face was twisted, his eyes questioning.

"I don't know, Jay. I can't even guess."

"Florida. He said something about Florida and the tides. Do you suppose he meant there'd be a tidal wave down there?"

Hill said, "Not so loud, fella, remember what the chief said."

Two white-jumpered mechanics trundled the Sportwing away from the elevator, and out to the head of Lane Two. One of the mechanics ducked back into the shade; the other mopped at his face with a towel, held the plane door open. Hill dropped a coin into his hand. The mechanic's voice followed him into the plane!

"Hot—it's one hundred and twenty-two on the roof right now, an' it ain't hit the top yet! I never seen nuthin' like this, an' I'd like to know how come them sunspots can make it so damn hot."

Forbes asked, "Did a Universal plane go out of here a few minutes ago?"

"Did it!" The mechanic grinned. "Them guys was really winging. They was doin' four hundred before they got off the roof. I thought the slip stream was goin' to blow me right back through the crash net. They just missed a transport, and—"

The closing door chopped his speech short. Forbes opened the speaker switch while Hill touched the starter. The propeller became a glittering silver disc as the dispatcher's words came into the hot cabin.

"Bell Sportwing. Okay for take-off. Watch the freight lane ahead for . . . ."

The ship was already moving. The hissing thrum of the motor deepened, the tail came up. Hill held the ship down while the end of the runway leaped to meet them. Then he yanked the stick back. The Sportwing spiraled tightly toward the sun.

The landing wheels had been folded back into the fuselage, and the air-conditioning unit had cut the intense heat in the cabin before the special bulletin came over the standard receiver.

"The Bureau of Health issues this special warning to all people living in houses or buildings equipped with air conditioning units. Do not, under any circumstances, set the thermostatic control for any temperature less than one hundred degrees during the daylight hours.

"Passing from the high temperatures outside into a temperature lower than one hundred degrees is more than the human body can readily stand, and is one cause of the many epidemics now sweeping the country. Repeating this special

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bulletin: The Bureau of Health. . . ."

A quizzical light came into Hill's eyes. "That sounds like there's more of this heat wave still to come."

"You heard Terry," Forbes said. "He was trying to say something about the temperature when that guy shot him." He got a cigarette out of his pocket. "Listen, Steve, let's not say anything to Penny about this. She'd just worry her head off."

Hill's voice was low. "You know I wouldn't."

He leveled the ship off at ten thousand feet, and set the automatic pilot. Forbes had dropped into a moody silence. Hill smoked quietly, and watched the green carpet of the earth below as it seemed to float lazily under them.

There was only one plane in sight on the University field when the Sportwing slanted down out of the sky. They watched it turn; watched the dust cloud kicked up by its slip stream trail the ship into the students' hangar.

Hill put the Sportwing in a steep bank at three thousand feet. De Spain University. A tightness came into his throat at the sight of the buildings set like a child's blocks in squares of dusty gray. The International College of Arts and Sciences. Founded and endowed in 1950 by De Spain, the college had the highest entrance requirements of any school in the world.

Four years of Steven Hill's life had been spent in those buildings. Four years, and now—Monday—he was saying goodby.

The squat building was the communications lab, where he and Forbes had met for the first time. There was the dorm, and beyond that a blue-domed building that housed the school of Math.

"Take her in, Steve, take her in. I told Penny we'd meet her at four o'clock. She wants to know how we came out."

"Right." Hill stood the ship on one wing tip, flashed past the radio towers, and nosed down. He circled the hangar quadrangle once, and went in for a landing.

CHAPTER II

DE SPAIN COMMANDS

PENELOPE MARTIN was waiting in a balcony booth of the restaurant in the Students' Center. She waved as they crossed to the moving ramp, and a moment later was smiling a greeting across the snowy linen of the table.

She was small and slender and dark. Hair as black as a raven's wing framed the perfect oval of her face. A smoothly rounded chin, vivid lips, and eyes that held glints of laughter—Penny Martin. Her voice was heady with suppressed excitement:

"Tell me! What did he say? What did he do? When do you go to work?"

Forbes said, "Monday, Penny."

"So soon? Why, that's only—" A quick frown creased her brow, and was gone. "I thought it took longer."

"We're replacing a couple of men from one of the crews, Penny." Forbes' big hand covered one of the girl's. "Two of them are coming in for a vacation."

Penny said breathlessly, "Tell me all about it!"

Forbes grinned at her, and then began to sketch the afternoon's events. Hill ordered three cold drinks from a waiter, and lost himself in thought.

Swell people, these two, about as fine as they came. This booth—its seat was barely wide enough for three—had been their meeting place for three years. And now those daily meetings were almost a college tradition. So nearly a tradition that no one else ever used their booth.

Penny had worn Forbes' ring from the beginning, but that hadn't mattered. The daily lunches gave each of them something. Friendship, laughter, and a moment's relaxation. And at De Spain those things were scarce, too scarce.

"I beg your pardon, Mr. Hill"—the waiter was back—"but I can't serve you any iced drinks."

Hill looked up. "Why not?"

"The National Bureau of Health has ordered us to serve no more chilled drinks, sir. They suggest hot coffee as the ideal drink during this hot weather."

"What do you think of that?" Hill sent a quick glance at the others. "Is coffee all right with you two?"

"Silly." Easy laughter bubbled from Penny's lips. "You can't drink a toast in coffee."

Forbes said, "Nevertheless we'll play along with the Bureau. Bring the coffee."

The waiter left then, and Penny said, "I forgot to tell you. There's been a couple of hundred soldiers here all day."

A question came into Hill's eyes. "Soldiers? Why?"

"After guns. They took all the guns out of the armory and loaded them in army transport planes. Then the officer in command spoke to us over the address

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system. Anyone found with any kind of a gun in his possession will be sentenced to five years in prison."

"My God!" The startled words jerked from Hill's lips. "They can't do that! That's walking on every right an American citizen has."

"They are doing it."

"Where does this fit in?" Forbes leaned across the table. "Bulletins, then mur—"

"Save it!" Hill's fingers caught Forbes' arm. "You're letting this heat get you. There's a logical explanation."

"Explanation?" Penny's eyes had suddenly lost their glint of laughter. "What are you hiding?"

Hill said, "Nothing, Penny. Jay's getting himself all worked up because he'll have to turn in that new Delta gun of his. That's all."

Anger came into Forbes' eyes. "I'll be damned if I will!"

"Easy," Hill cautioned, "here's the waiter."

No one spoke for a long moment after that. Then it was Penny who said, "It isn't wine, and it isn't cold, but it will have to do." She picked up her cup, her dark eyes serious. "Gentlemen, a toast."

A strained grin pulled at Forbes' lips. Hill waited.

"To you two," the girl said, "a couple of the best newscasters in the—"

"Hold it." Hill spoke swiftly. "Why change now? We've got a toast, one that we've used every day for three years. Why change?"

"But that—" Penny's protest died there.

"He's right," Forbes said harshly.

Hill's mind went leaping back across the years as he raised his coffee cup. Back to the first time he'd sat in this booth, to the day he'd first heard the words.

"May you live forever"—the three voices were as one—"and I never die!"

Their toast! Just words, to any other person, but memories to them. Day by day pictures across the years. Words that were tangled deep in the skein of their lives.

"May you live forever." The words ran on in Hill's mind. This could never be recaptured—they all knew that. College behind. Tomorrow they'd pack, and the morning after—the Universal Roof.

"IT'S been nice." Penny's voice was soft. "We've had a lot of fun, and this is farewell. I still think we should have had wine."

Hill studied the tip of his cigarette. "When," he asked slowly, "are you two going to get married?"

Faint red tinted Penny's cheeks, and Forbes' growl came from deep in his throat. "The first time I get a couple of days off."

"Swell!" Hill grinned across the table. "That really calls for wine."

"Mr. Hill!"

Hill swung to face the shout. A white-faced undergrad was running toward him, shouting again as he topped the ramp:

"Hill! They want you in the Administration Building, right now! I've been hunting you for an hour. Come on, man, hurry!"

Hill came to his feet. "What's it all about?"

"There's a long distance for you on the Visa-phone. They been holding the call. De Spain wants to talk to you."

"Who?"

"De Spain!"

That name cut through the clamor in the Center. A sudden whispering murmur ran around the big room. Pushed-back chairs scraped on the tile, and craning heads peered up at them.

A bleak grin pulled at Hill's lips. "Come along, you two, and get a look at the man who's got all the money in the world."

Excitement came into Penny's voice. "Can we? Come on, Jay." She slipped out of the booth.

They took the ramp down, crossed the crowded floor, and went out into the intense heat of the afternoon. Hill spoke only once during the short ride.

"Why didn't you call me over the address system?"

"Couldn't," the student panted. "Orders are to hold that open for government bulletins."

The girl at the control board leaned close to her microphone as soon as she saw them come through the door. Then she stammered, "Use—use number one. It's—it's De Spain himself."

Hill slowed his stride to say, "There's a window on each side of the booth. You can see from there without being seen."

The Visa-grid was still dark when Hill stepped into the booth, but the two scanning tubes glowed with a pale red light. A low voice from the speaker asked, "Ready, Mr. Hill?"

"Yes."

Hot, white light spilled across Hill's face. The red glow of the scanning tubes changed to pale blue. The screen in front

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of him came to life. A ticking second, and then De Spain's image became clear and sharp. His head was tipped forward, his eyes half closed.

"Steven Hill?"

"Yes."

"I am Alpha De Spain. You will report to the air field at Washington D.C. at nine a.m. tomorrow. Your transportation has all been arranged."

Steven Hill held himself motionless before the screen. Quick anger burned in his mind. The white-haired old man was casually wrecking plans he'd worked four years to complete.

"I'm sorry," he said slowly, "but I have already accepted employment."

"That does not change anything. There is no one, particularly at this time, who can offer you more than I. You owe your first debt to me."

"But—"

"Report at nine a.m. tomorrow. Are there any questions?"

"What am I supposed to do?"

"That will be explained at the proper time." De Spain turned. His hawklike profile shone for just a second on the screen, then blurred and disappeared.

A bitter curse spilled from Hill's lips as he pivoted to the door. Forbes and Penny came to meet him. Forbes touched his arm, asked:

"What's wrong, Steve? You looked like he kicked you in the belly."

"That's one way to say it." Hill kept his eyes away from Forbes' face. "I'm not going to work for Universal."

"You—you mean De Spain offered you a job?"

Hill nodded.

Forbes stared, and then swore in sharp amazement. "You clown. I'd be standing on my head if I ever had a chance like that. De Spain!"

"I know," Hill said. "He's done more for humanity than anyone ever did. Beta Fuel, Delta Guns, Gamma Metal. He's given colleges and universities more money than any ten men."

"Right," Forbes agreed. "He's the number one brain in the world, and you're feeling bad because he wants you on his staff. Man, you stayed out in the sun too long."

"But we'd planned—"

Forbes' harsh laughter rang through the room. "Yeah, we'd planned. But don't let that worry you, Steve. You wouldn't be any good on a casting crew anyway. The sun gets you too easily." He spun on his heels. "Let's get out of here."

Penny tried to put a lightness in her voice and didn't quite succeed. "Sure, let's celebrate. I'll tell you, let's stay up all night and watch the sun come up. It's a brand new day for all of us anyway."

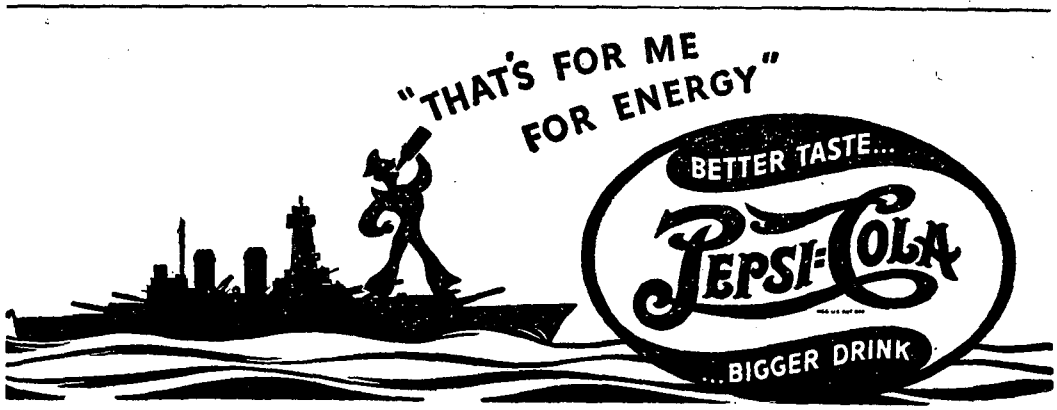
Hill grinned down at her. "Penny, every once in a long while you get an idea."

They turned, arm in arm, and were halfway to the moving ramp before Penny spoke. "Let's not—not talk about tomorrow." She didn't look up, and there was a husky catch to her voice. "Let's pretend it's just another day."

"Anything, Penny, anything." Forbes' hand shook as he lighted a cigarette. "Anyway this isn't a funeral. We'll stand the town on its prop. I've got sixty dollars I'm not going to need."

Penny said, "No, Jay, I've got a better idea. You remember the wineshop on Thirty-second? And the News-House we went to freshman year when we didn't have much money?"

"Sure," Hill cut in, "and the French place on the second level in the Dover section. The graveyard, and the point



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where we watched the sunrise the night of the Junior Formal."

"We'll save that for last," Penny said. "The best for the last."

"And I'll buy wine," Forbes laughed, "lots of wine. And then I'll sing and wreck every microphone in the place."

"But we'll go fast." Penny looked up at them, eyes shining. "As fast as we can, and then we can't find time to think."

Hill looked away. Forbes' "Sure, darling," came from low in his throat.

They were in the entrance then, and Penny waved a squat-bodied cab in to the curb. "A lady has to dress," she said. "I'll be ready at nine."

The two men stood on the steps and watched the cab speed away through the hot shadows of early twilight. It was Jay who broke the silence.

"We'd better dress too."

Hill nodded.

CHAPTER III

PRELUDE TO DISASTER

THEY went to *Papa Videau's* first. Papa, himself, shouted a jovial greeting from his post by the cash register, and came—hands outstretched, smiling—to meet them.

Penny's laughter seemed to fill the room. "Wine, Papa. Tonight we laugh, and tomorrow. . . ." She stopped, suddenly, the color leaving her cheeks. "No, Papa, not tomorrow. Tonight is as far as we look. Hurry with the wine."

"At once," Papa Videau's big voice rumbled. "You, Henri, the bottles from the corner bin. Quick, or I shake your heels till your teeth rattle."

An hour they stayed there, and then a rickety cab took them to a club across the city where the waiters wore red jackets, and funny hats. Where Penny stuffed coins into the slot of a robot musician, and they couldn't hear each other above the noise.

A roof garden next, where the stars shone hot and clear through the crystal glass of the arched dome. Hours fled. There was music and noise and wine. Wine in dusty, hundred-year-old bottles. Wine that sparkled in thin-stemmed glasses and brought laughter to Penny's lips. Laughter that didn't ring quite true.

Midnight found them in the News-House. Six separate dining rooms, like spokes in a giant wheel, sloped down toward the newscasting screens. They talked and drank, while a Chinese Festival, a crash on a foggy London airport, and the muffled boom of a clock in Paris formed the background.

There was dancing on the second level. Amusement Features had its screens there, and they watched part of a delayed broadcast of a New York play.

The laughter had gone out of Penny's eyes then. She spoke only when one of them addressed her, and then without raising her eyes. She looked up, finally, to say:

"Jay, take me away from here."

They had almost reached the door when the brazen clang of a gong stopped them in their tracks. Hill snapped: "That's a special flash! It'll be on all the screens—come on!"

A half a dozen running steps took them back to the archway. A stocky man in whites occupied the whole screen. His swift, clipped speech was the only sound in the big room.

". . . Two members of the president's Cabinet tonight committed suicide following a special Cabinet meeting which lasted all day. The double suicide came as a complete surprise, and shocked and stunned all Washington. President Kingston refused to comment on the tragedy, nor would he divulge the cause for the prolonged meeting which preceded the suicides."

Hill's brows came down. "Now what? There's something big breaking. Something plenty big!"

Forbes nodded silently.

"Listen, you two!" Penny tugged at their sleeves. "Come on, we've got to get the sun out of bed. There's time enough to worry about the world tomorrow."

"Right, Penny." Forbes cupped his big hand under her chin, tilted her head up. "You crack the whip, and we'll jump through hoops."

Another cab, this time rolling eastward across the dark and silent city. The driver managed to find a sandwich shop that was still open. The grinning counterman dug a couple of bottles of wine from under the counter, and made a foot-high stack of sandwiches.

The false dawn was tinting the sky when they roared down the elevated cross-State highway. They ate hugely, and sang between bites. The cab driver tossed a queer look over his shoulder when Hill directed him down a ramp, and

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through the gates of an old cemetery.

"I don't know," he said. "Maybe I'll lose my license for this. I ought to—"

"Have a sandwich," Penny offered gravely. "And stop by that big tomb. We'll get out there."

The driver turned when Hill tossed him a crumpled bill. "Hey, don't you want me to wait?"

Penny said, "No, thanks. We're burning our taxis behind us."

The driver muttered something under his breath as he got the cab under way.

"I've tried, I've really tried." There was no lightness in Penny's voice now. "But it won't work. This is the—"

"Don't say it," Forbes cut in. "We've still got to get the sun out of bed."

A curving path took them up a gentle slope to the point. An air beacon, on a distant hill, probed the sky with a blade of light, but thick and somber shadows lay heavily in the valley below.

Penny said: "Sunrise. This is tomorrow, and everything begins again."

"A crazy tomorrow." Hill kept his eyes on the distant beacon. "The rules have been thrown away. Even Nature's forgotten the rules. Heat waves in March, crop failures, suicides—it makes you wonder."

No one spoke in the next half hour. The shadows lightened, and the scarlet fan of the rising sun opened slowly in the eastern sky.

"This is it." Hill got to his feet. "I'll just have time to pack."

"Never say goodby, Steve." Penny kept her eyes averted. "Farewells are bad luck."

"Right." Hill's hand came up in a casual half-salute. "See you." He went back down the path. Once he looked back to see their figures silhouetted sharply against the blood-red of the sunrise.

Swell people, he thought, as he climbed the ramp to the elevated highway. A year, or two years, and he'd be coming back to see a young Forbes. Swell. . . .

A huge freight truck slowed, and the driver leaned out of the cab to ask, "Goin' into town?"

Hill climbed into the truck, and the next time he looked back the point was out of sight.

STEVEN HILL shrugged his light jacket tight across his shoulders, and settled back in his seat as the transport settled in for a landing.

Washington airport. The wind cone sagged emptily, and the flag drooped against its staff. White dots grew to be sun-helmeted attendants who moved slowly through the blazing heat. Hill glanced at his watch. Only eight-thirty a.m., and already the thermometer was crowding a hundred and ten degrees.

The landing wheels touched. The big plane slowed, came around in a rumbling turn, and taxied into the shadowy gloom of the unloading hangar.

The announcing horns were talking before Hill left the plane. "Mr. Steven Hill. Will Mr. Hill please stop at the main desk?"

Once at the main desk he had only to say, "I'm Steven Hill," to have the clerk become all attention.

"Yes, sir. The men are putting your luggage aboard the Greydon now, and any time you're ready—"

"Greydon?"

"Yes, sir. Mr. De Spain chartered a ship in your name for the hop between here and Salt Lake."

Hill grinned. A Greydon! De Spain must be in a hurry. The last word in over-weather ships, the Greydons were capable of a top speed of a thousand miles an hour, at an altitude of twelve miles.

"Right," Hill said dryly, "I'm ready when you are."

A uniformed attendant led Hill down a ramp, and out into the hot glare of the sun where a wide-winged Greydon waited in front of the Administration Building.

The pilot had the motor ticking over, and almost before Hill was well seated he swung the ship, and raced down the field.

"Don't you have to have clearance?" Hill asked.

"No, sir," the pilot grinned. "When De Spain hires a ship he owns the air. We've got right-of-way over everything that flies."

The Greydon climbed swiftly in a tight spiral. The pilot set the robot control, and started the unit which supplied air for the cabin.

"The rest is easy," he said.

Hill nodded. "How about the radio?"

"I usually keep the standard set turned off—there's nothing but bulletins anyway—but I heard one of the newscasters say the president was going to speak."

Washington was not quite an hour behand when the speaker disc came crisply to life. "Last night the nation was shocked at the news of the suicide of two

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members of the president's Cabinet. This news was followed by speculation and countless rumors, but the facts have not, until now, been known. One man, and one man alone, can give us those facts. To the listening audience I present the Honorable James G. Kingston, the president of the United States."

A moment's silence, and then a deep, grave voice said:

"I hope that everyone within reach of my voice will find time to listen—for mine is a difficult and important message. For months my Cabinet and myself have been working under tremendous strain—and last night that strain proved too great a load for two of them. Still, I who have been close to them from the beginning, cannot blame them. I only wonder that something of this nature has not happened before now.

"This is not a pleasant message. There is grave trouble ahead. A trouble which affects not only our own country, but the whole world. A trouble so large, so unbelievable, that I cannot, as yet, make the details known. I can, however, say this. It is not an invasion, or a war, but a greater trouble—a kind the world has never before known.

"I ask for your faith. Every possible detail must be checked, and checked again. That, necessarily, takes time. I make you, the people of the United States, this promise. Within the week I will again talk to you. At that time I will give you the details for which you wait. Until then I ask your patience, your trust."

There was only the faint crackle of static, and the muted hum of the engine. The pilot's eyes clouded. "Nice talking," he said, "but he didn't tell us anything."

Hill only nodded. His mind had gone back to the Universal Newscasting office. He heard again Terry's low, hoarse voice. "Chief, he says this is just the beginning. The whole state of Florida's goin' under. The temperature's goin' up to—"

Death had stopped those words. Death from a Delta gun in the hand of a Naval officer. Two men had died trying to relay that information from the Naval Hospital to Beck. And two Cabinet officers had taken their own lives since that time.

"Not an invasion," the president had said, "and not a war." What else? Terry had mentioned the temperature, and the tides. Then, this unending heat wave had to be the answer. Had to!

"This thing don't make sense." The pilot mopped his face. "I heard a broadcast from Washington last night. Some guy was talking about this heat wave. He said there is an immense blanket of air around the sun, just like there is around the earth. That air is the only thing that keeps the earth from being fried like an egg. His idea was that the air blanket around the sun's getting thin, and that accounts for this heat. He says it'll thicken up again."

Hill got a cigarette out of his pocket. "That's one theory I hadn't heard before."

"Sure, but what if he's right about the cause, and wrong about the other? What if that air doesn't thicken up? Then what?"

"Then," Hill returned slowly, "we'll find out what hell is like."

"Yes, that's what I've been thinking. But what the devil? The crackpots have been having brain storms like that for years. He probably doesn't know any more than we do."

HILL finished his cigarette, and then dozed for an hour. The ship was tilted steeply down, when he awoke, and the pilot grinned at him from the controls.

"Be there in five minutes. An' wait till you see the ship that De Spain sent to pick you up. It'll have variable wing pitch, and variable wing area. De Spain's ships make these look like a fleet of coal wagons."

"Are you sure there'll be a ship to meet me?"

"Will there?" The pilot laughed. "If there isn't it'll be the first time, an' I've ferried plenty of you guys in for De Spain."

They were circling the field, coming in on one wing-tip, when the pilot touched Hill's arm. "There's the ship, that blood-red job next to the big hangar."

Hill kept his eyes on the red plane while they landed. Small and trim, it looked something like the pictures of the old-fashioned pursuit jobs Big-engined, stubby, its low wings had a camber unlike any Hill had ever seen before.

The Greydon had stopped beside the red plane before Hill saw the man who lounged in the scant shade of the wing. A big, dark-haired, smiling man who came to meet them. Laughter lines webbed the skin around his mouth as he thrust his hand up.

"Hi there, son. My name's O'Day.

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Brian O'Day." His voice was warm and rich and deep; his smile a three-cornered flash of white. "Toss your bags down. We've got to wing. There's a mess of dirty weather ahead of us."

"Right." Hill laughed. "Three bags, coming down."

He helped O'Day stow the luggage, and then followed him into the small cabin. The big Irishman said, "You'll need the safety belt, son. She's a sweet ship—the fastest thing on wings—but she can dish out a beating, too. Did I tell you we've got to run through a storm?"

"Yes," Hill answered, "but why don't you go over the bad weather?"

"It's not worth bothering about."

O'Day started the engine, whipped the small ship around. The engine sound swelled to a roar; the red plane snarled down the field.

O'Day brought the tail up, and then held the ship on the ground till it seemed that it couldn't possibly clear the building that leaped toward them. Then, with a swooping rush, he took the ship up.

The rise slammed Hill back hard against the seat, held him there gasping for breath. The ground, the grouped buildings of the airport, described a dizzy arc as the red ship seemed to bounce crazily. Then, the torturing bank was over, and they were streaking north across a dark and lowering sky.

Hill caught the Irishman's quick grin, and shouted: "Is that the best this boiler will do?"

O'Day laughed. "You know there's not another plane in the world that can do that." He switched on the automatic pilot, and then turned. "What's your line, son?"

"Sound engineering." Hill answered.

"Ever do any flying?"

"A little."

"Let's see your license."

Hill got a leather folder out of his pocket, and passed it to O'Day. The big man swore in sharp amazement. "A little, he says, 'I've done a little flying.' Now isn't that just like the Irish?" A warm smile lighted his eyes. "And if you think I don't know how tough those inspectors can be, you're crazy."

A moment later he grinned again, "God bless us, but he's got a ticket for Unlimited Power. Yes, and Unlimited Speed. Any pilot would give his left leg for one of these. You wouldn't be taking O'Day for a ride would you, son?"

Hill smiled in return. "No, and you

"I am already promised," Theta De Spain told Hill. "My marriage is to be the first to take place in the new world"

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wouldn't be putting me over the jumps would you, O'Day?"

The Irishman laughed, thrust out his hand. "Shake, son, we'll get along."

THEY were into the storm then. Pelting rain slashed at the windows. Ahead of them, a blaze of lightning ripped the sky. O'Day's teeth shone in a wide smile. He switched back to the manual controls. Cables of muscle writhed across his shoulders as he held the red ship on course.

Hill watched, and marveled at the big man's skill. O'Day seemed to sense the mood of the storm, to anticipate the terrific bursts of wind. A dozen times he seemed to outguess the storm.

As suddenly as the storm had come it was gone, and O'Day's laughter rang above the engine noise. "She's a grand ship. She flies like an angel."

Hill put his lips close to O'Day's ear. "How come that engine makes so much noise?"

"That's a new type of engine, made out of De Spain's Omicron metal. There's power there, more power than any other engine in the world can turn out. Hell, I like the noise. When I started flying they all made noise, plenty of it. I flew an overweather job on the London-Sidney run. You should have been around then, son. It was only a fifty-fifty chance you'd get through."

Twenty minutes later O'Day prodded Hill's ribs. "There's Anaconda, and De Spain's headquarters."

The plane had flashed across a ridge of hills, and below them on the Montana plain there was a small city. A mile or more away from that city, a wide concrete runway glimmered hot and white in the sunlight. A landing field, surely, but there were no hangars near it. In fact nothing but a series of narrow lines of white in ever widening circles.

Hill put his question into words. "Where are the hangars?"

"Underground."

"What are those things around the field?"

"Fences." The Irishman was terse. "De Spain isn't having any visitors he doesn't want. Either from the ground or from the air. Now—or ever."

"But why?"

A questioning light came into O'Day's eyes. "Don't you know why those fences are there? Or why you're here? Or what's going to. . . ." He stopped, asked, "Is this the truth? Don't you know what's up?"

Hill said, "No, I—I guess I don't."

"Well, I'll be fried in oil." O'Day nosed the ship down. "You'll find out, son, before long. I'd tell you, but my orders won't let me. Anyway, you'll be better off getting it from one of the Twelve, or from De Spain himself. Me, I just fly their ships."

"The Twelve?"

"Stick around, son, we're there now."

The red ship was on the ground then, running toward the base of the cliff, toward giant doors set in the rock. One set of those doors was opening, swinging up, like covers of an opening book.

O'Day taxied the ship inside. Hill turned to see the doors scissoring shut behind them. O'Day cut the engine switch, and motioned Hill to the door ahead of him.

CHAPTER IV

THE PLOT AGAINST HUMANITY

HILL dropped to the floor, looked around. They were in a high ceilinged, many pillared room that stretched deep into the mountain. A bank of huge elevators lined one wall, and a dozen other ships were lined up across the floor.

"This way, son." O'Day threw a jacket across his shoulders, moved away.

"But my bags—"

"They'll be down later, come on."

Hill fell in step with O'Day. He noticed, then, how cool it was, a coolness that reminded him of a rain-washed summer night. He grinned, "Man, De Spain's air-conditioning plant must be something to see."

"It is," O'Day said, "and so's the rest of the place. I'll sketch the highlights for you as we go. Those big elevators are for the planes, and only go down a hundred feet to the hangars. There are two other sets. One on this side, and one over there against the other wall. We use these. De Spain and the Twelve use the others."

The big man stopped in front of a cylindrical elevator tube. The doors snapped open, sliding back around the shell. O'Day nodded Hill inside.

Hill took a single step inside, and stopped to look down.

O'Day grinned. "That's sponge rubber," he said. "The whole floor moves up and down to absorb the starting shock. Hang

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onto the bar there, or it'll knock you flat on your face." He reached for the control board. "Hang on."

Hill's stomach surged up. There was muffled roaring, a sense of giddy motion that lasted only a few seconds, and then the doors were opening again.

"All out, son, this is 'B' Level. All the men are quartered on this side of the elevator bank, the women on the other side. De Spain's headquarters are on 'A' Level, a hundred feet above this."

"How far down are we?"

"Something over six hundred feet."

A dozen questions sprang into Hill's mind, as the two of them walked down a wide corridor which was walled in a silvery metal. The air here had the same rain-washed freshness. Their feet made no sound on the floor.

"This way."

O'Day turned to the right, went through an arched doorway, and into a pleasant lounge. There were fifty or a hundred men there, in front of the four newscasting screens, playing Sho-jet, or talking in small groups. There were comfortable chairs, and deep lounges scattered around the floor, and a big circular table in the center of the room. O'Day led the way to this.

"A recruit for you, boys."

Half of the men there turned, as the Irishman spoke, and one of them detached himself from the group to come to Hill's side.

"I'm Douglas," he said. "I'll assign you to your quarters. What's your particular field?"

"Sound engineering."

A thin-faced, swart man laughed. "A yowl engineer, huh? Hell, there's two or three of them around already. An' I thought this was going to be exclusive. It looks to me like De Spain picked the heels, an' left the best of 'em outside to die."

Hill's jaw clamped. A wave of red swept up his neck.

The swart man's eyes glittered under lowered lids. He pivoted away from the table—a tall, well built man in the uniform of a flyer. "I don't like yowl men, Douglas; don't put this guy in my room."

All over the room the murmur of voices stopped. There was only the low sound of the news screens, and the heavy breathing of the Irishman at Hill's side.

The swart man laughed.

Red rage flamed in Hill's brain. A clock-tick, and he was gliding forward. The swart man cursed in surprise. Hill's open palm swept up to smash solidly across the man's mouth.

The swart man went back till his hips hit the table. He swayed there, shaking his head. Hill took a single step, and then a dozen men were between them.

O'Day's big hand was heavy on Hill's shoulder. "Hold it, son." He pushed past Hill to stop in front of the swart man. "You asked for that, Borsi, and you got it." O'Day's voice was bleak and raw. "You know what happens when De Spain hears about trouble down here. You started this. Make another move, and I'll tear that ugly head off of your shoulders. Get that, you've been getting away with murder—but that's all over!"

Borsi's eyes blazed. He pawed at the blood that trickled across his chin. "Okay, Brian, maybe I did—but what the hell? There's no need for you to blow your head."

"And while I'm thinking about it, Borsi," O'Day ground out, "this lad carries an Unlimited Power ticket. Why don't you tack that paper of yours on the board sometime? Leave it there, too. It'll take a long time to read all the limitation clauses on it."

Borsi swung on his heel and stalked away.

"Your quarters are out this way, Hill," Douglas said quietly. "If you'll come. . . ."

O'Day asked, "Mind if I tag along, son?"

Hill looked up, and shook his head. Douglas led the way down a long corridor. He looked back over his shoulder to say, "I'm sorry about this, Hill, but we're pretty well filled up. The only space left on this level is half of Borsi's room."

"Wait a minute," O'Day interrupted. "We can put a bed in my quarters."

"But you rate. . . ."

O'Day said, "Never mind, we'll do it that way."

Douglas shrugged. "It's plenty all right with me."

A MOMENT later they were turning through a doorway into a dark room. And for the first time Hill realized that he had never noticed the light. That, although he knew they were six hundred feet underground, he had taken the illumination for granted.

"One second, son." O'Day's shoulder touched Hill's as he leaned past him. Then soft light, emanating from nowhere, erased the darkness.

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O'Day saw his puzzled look. "Yes, that light bothered me, too, at first. That's another of De Spain's little gadgets. It comes from the wall—like luminous paint—only you can turn it off and on."

Hill said, "Well, I'll be damned."

"Sit down, son." The Irishman pulled a chair close to the bed. "I stopped what might have been a sweet fight. I think you could have taken him, but that has nothing to do with it. The discipline here is tougher than any army ever had. I know—I've seen plenty of armies. Mr. A. . . ."

"Who?"

"Mr. A. De Spain's first name is Alpha, you know that. We call him 'Mr. A' when we're sure we're not near an ear. He's got recording ears all over the place, and the records are played once a day, so be careful what you say."

"But I thought. . . ."

O'Day's upraised hand stopped him. "Never mind that now. I haven't much time, and I've got a lot to tell you. Lunch is at one o'clock, and that doesn't mean one minute after. Everything is timed in seconds down here, so when you get an order, carry it out on the second, or have a plenty good reason for not doing it.

"It looks to me like you weren't contacted in advance the way the rest of us were so you don't know what to expect. You'll be called to 'A' level for an interview in a day or two, but in the meantime walk easy."

"Maybe Mr. De Spain will see me today," Hill said.

"Listen, son, you've got just one chance in a hundred of seeing De Spain at all. He's harder to see than God. Damn few of these guys—and there are about two thousand of them here not counting the women—have ever seen him except on a screen. I'd like to tell you what to expect, but there isn't time. Remember this, though—walk easy!"

Hill straightened. "Thanks, O'Day, but things are pretty much messed up just now."

"The name's Brian, son." O'Day's fingers bit lightly into Hill's shoulder. "You'll get by all right if you'll remember not to say anything before you get all the details. Just. . . ."

The strident clang of a gong chopped O'Day's speech short. "That's lunch." O'Day got to his feet. "Let's go."

They joined the throng that swirled around a wide doorway, filed into a big dining room. Silver and crystal gleamed on two hundred tables. O'Day led the way to a pillar—twelve feet square—and took a steaming tray from a glass compartment. Another tray rose, instantly, to take its place.

They ate at a table which seated five, while the conical speakers mounted on the ceiling spilled a crisp bulletin:

"A hurricane roared in off the Gulf early this morning to strike the lower coast of Florida. Miami, which was in the main path of the storm, suffered a huge loss of life and property damage which will run into millions. The only reports available stated that the known dead numbered more than ten thousand. The steamers known to be in that vicinity have not been heard from since the storm.

"The tidal wave which followed the hurricane wrecked millions of dollars' worth of small pleasure craft. President Kingston ordered a hundred army planes to the scene to establish military law, and to supply first aid. Further reports will be broadcast as soon as they are available. That is all."

Hill started to speak, but O'Day's warning glance stopped the words in his throat.

They had almost finished eating when Hill saw Borsi, two tables away. The flyer's mouth was swollen, and hatred blazed in his dark eyes.

"Cigarette, son?"

Hill turned to find the Irishman extending his case. He nodded, dug a lighter out of his pocket. He was pulling the first smoke deep into his lungs when the speaker horns came to life again.

"Order for Steven Hill. You will report to 'A' Level at two twenty-eight. That is all."

Silence followed the announcement. Hill's eyes flicked to O'Day, but the big Irishman's face might have been carved from stone. A wondering buzz of voices rose, and men stared at their table from all over the room. A fat-faced, bespectacled man on Hill's right said, "An' I've been trying to get to 'A' Level for three months."

Again the clang of a gong rolled through the room. Hill pushed back his chair, said, "Come on, son, you've got an hour and a half yet."

BRIAN O'DAY said: "This is the place, son. You wait right here. You've got forty seconds left."

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"Right, and thanks." Hill's eyes followed the big man's retreating back, and then dropped to his wrist watch. Thirty seconds left now. Twenty. . . .

A bleak smile pulled at Hill's lips. Split-second precision, orders, and secrecy. What kind of ideas did De Spain have about the men who worked for him? Part of Borsi's remark whispered through his mind. ". . . Looks like De Spain picked the heels, and left the best of them outside to die."

The second hand swung to two twenty-eight. There was a sharp click, and the elevator door in front of Hill snapped open. A metallic voice said: "Steven Hill to 'A' Level."

There was the same sensation of breathless speed, the same brief wait. The doors opened this time on a white-rugged, blue-walled hall. A speaker grid somewhere ahead of him said: "This way, please."

The white rug was soft under his feet. A flight of low stairs led up through an arched door. A moment later Steven Hill was staring across a small room at the one man whose name was known throughout the world.

Alpha De Spain! Beta fuel—the ninety-eight per cent efficient gasoline which gave trucks two hundred miles to the gallon—had brought him fame and wealth beyond words. A host of other inventions followed. Delta guns, Epsilon screens, Zeta gas, and Omicron metal. Universities and hospitals bore his name. Alpha De Spain— The Great Humanitarian!

Still, in the flesh, he was only a man. Pointed chin, lean aquiline nose, eyes that gleamed narrow and green. Alpha De Spain, behind whose smooth deep brow there lay the greatest brain the world had ever known.

De Spain's voice was almost a purr. "Sit down, Hill."

Hill obeyed.

De Spain bent his head until his chin touched the silken scarf knotted around his throat. "I sent for you rather belatedly. Your name was overlooked on our lists through an error of some sort, and we make few errors here. I knew your father, and I know of your scholastic record." He paused. "You're curious about this place. It's natural that you should be. Allow me to explain."

Hill waited.

De Spain built a neat temple of his fingers. "You've seen only a small portion of our quarters here. You will, as soon as we finish this talk, be shown over the whole place. There are four thousand people here, half of them women. The men represent every branch of science and technical engineering. There are supplies here—food, clothing, medicine, in short everything that will be needed in the next five years. Now, what does that suggest to you?"

"Why that—that you are preparing for a siege of some sort."

"You might say it that way. Or you might call this an Ark—for it is exactly that—a sunken Ark. Prepared not for water but for fire—for the world will this time be destroyed by fire!"

"Destroyed!" Hill gasped. "But that's fantastic."

"It sounds fantastic," De Spain corrected, "until you look at the facts. This heat wave is now two months old. Temperatures of a hundred and twenty degrees have been recorded in New York—in March!

"That, too, is fantastic," De Spain went on, "but it is also fact. Hill, two months ago the earth left the orbit on which it has swung around the sun for countless millions of years. Every government in the world is aware of this, and every government has kept it a secret. They have had to. Think of the panic, the utter dissolution of the human race, when the news is made public."

Hill said, "But, God. . . ."

De Spain leaned forward, his lips forming soft, precise words. "This much we know, Hill. The world is not coming to an end, but the human race is! The crawling millions who spawn like insects will be no more. Except for this Ark, every trace of life, plant and animal, will be utterly destroyed. Nor is there any way they can be saved.

"The earth's new orbit will carry it so close to the sun that the temperature will rise to at least four hundred degrees. That will last for four months. Then eight months of winter. The earth will swing further away from the sun than it has ever been. The temperature will drop close to the absolute zero of space, minus two hundred and sixty-five degrees.

"This Ark is the cradle of a new race. A superior race. Here, scientific propagation will insure a race of supermen. There will be no weaklings, no fools. And this because I have chosen only the finest bodies and brains in the world. Every-

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thing we need, or can possibly need, is here. You, Hill, are fortunate to be included. You will, of course, show your appreciation for that inclusion by obeying, exactly, the orders of your immediate superiors."

CHAPTER V

THETA DE SPAIN

THE end of the human race! Cold sweat started on Steven Hill's back at the thought. This was the reason Terry had been killed, the reason the Cabinet officers had committed suicide! Hill's stomach knotted. God! All life, except in this small place, gone like a snuffed-out candle flame. . .

His eyes sought De Spain's face. "But" —his voice was a bare whisper—"what can be done? Surely there is something. . . ."

De Spain shook his head. "No, there isn't time. Two months will bring the heat to its maximum. Two hundred years wouldn't be long enough to prepare underground quarters for the population of the United States alone." He broke off then, and turned to a low microphone beside his chair. "Theta, will you come to my quarters at once, please?"

The shock had numbed Hill's brain. Four thousand left out of all the teeming millions. Genius and idiot, prince and commoner, white man and black—all of them gone! Back to the dust from which they sprang. . . .

Hill's hands were clenched, his eyes fixed blankly on the floor. He hardly heard the light voice say:

"You wanted me, father?"

"Yes, Theta. This is Steven Hill. You are to show him the Ark."

Steven Hill's eyes jerked up. A woman stood in the doorway, a slender woman whose dark hair held glints of blue in the soft light. Hill stared as a name leaped to his lips. Penny Martin! But it couldn't be, Penny was two thousand miles away.

Still, this woman's lips were the same vivid red, her face the same clear oval. The two of them might have been twins save for the eyes. These were gray, cool, and they held no laughter.

"Theta," De Spain said, "this is Steven Hill."

The woman nodded, and Hill murmured an almost inaudible something. Another moment, and he was walking beside her down the blue-walled hall to the elevator.

She spoke into a grid, "Elevator to 'A' Level." She turned then. "It is a shock, isn't it? At first it seems pretty horrible, but later you'll see it's all for the best."

"The best?" Hill pushed the words through stiff lips. "With the world wiped clean?"

"No disease, no war, no class struggle, and no money. Surely, you can see those advantages. Then, from this Ark, a new world."

Steven Hill frowned, shook his head. "You've got to look at it that way I suppose. But to me it's a nightmare."

The elevator door snicked open and the girl said, "The tour begins. Wait, I almost forgot. You'll want to see the quarters on Lower 'A.' The Twelve are there."

"Who are the Twelve?" Hill asked.

The girl led the way back along the hall. A door slid back on a flight of wide stairs. "The Twelve are the leaders in the twelve most important fields of learning. There are eleven men and one woman. Their quarters are here"—she nodded at a row of open doors. "The laboratories are on this level too, and the controls for all the machines." She smiled. "There really isn't much to see here, we'll go back to the elevator."

The bullet-like descent of the small elevator lasted for what seemed an hour. The low-pitched hum reached Hill's ears, even before the doors snapped back, and then swelled to a dull roar.

Theta De Spain said: "This way."

They stepped out upon a balcony, which was really only a narrow catwalk suspended from the high ceiling of a huge room.

Hill stared. Row upon row of dynamos filled the floor below them. Giant dynamos, a hundred feet in diameter. Twelve abreast, the rows stretched far into the distance.

The noise made speech impossible. Men moved, here and there, on the floor. One of them looked up at the catwalk, and raised a greasy hand in a half salute. The girl touched Hill's arm, stepped back into the elevator.

A three-second ride, up. Then along a corridor, and into a dark-walled, circular room.

"Our planetarium," Theta De Spain said. "This will give you a better idea of what's to happen." She stooped over a control board, touched a switch. Two

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gloves, halfway between the ceiling and floor, glowed with a red light. One was six inches in diameter, the other much smaller.

"The big one is, of course, the sun. The other is the earth. This scale is distorted, for if it wasn't we'd have to use a microscope to see the earth. Watch."

She touched another switch, and the small globe described a circle around the large one. "The old orbit," she said in a swift, low voice. "The sun almost the exact center. That kept the temperature nearly constant. Now watch."

STEVEN HILL did watch while his throat constricted, and cold sweat stood on his forehead. This second orbit was a circle, too, but the sun was no longer at its center. Instead, the small globe swung close and then passed far away from the large one.

"That's crude, but it's the principle of the orbit distortion." Theta De Spain's head was tipped back. "The actual orbit is not a true circle, but slightly elliptical. Everything else is done exactly the way it is actually happening."

"Then you *do* know the cause?"

"Of course. The position of the globes between the floor and ceiling is maintained by placing them there between opposing forces, both of which exert an equal pull. That doesn't prevent them from moving as they just did. The old orbit is simple enough; you're interested in the new one. Right?"

"Right." The single word came out at the end of his breath. An icy hand seemed to be squeezing his stomach.

"Look closely at the small globe. You can see a red mark on it which represents the location of the Ark upon the earth. There is an electrical control there. That control is responsible for the eccentric orbit. That's only a surface explanation, but my father could spend a week explaining the actual process, and its cause. He says there are only three men, besides himself, who could understand it."

Hill swayed there, while the blood pounded in his temples. Sheets of red fire seemed to burst in his brain, to dance before his eyes. It fitted! Unbelievable; but it did! An electrical control pulled the earth off of its orbit! *The red mark represents the Ark!*

Electrical control! He was remembering row upon row of snarling, giant dynamos: hearing again the girl's voice. ". . . my father could spend a week explaining the actual process. . . ."

The sure knowledge hit him like the weight of a giant hand. Alpha De Spain was destroying the human race! The man the world knew as The Great Humanitarian was destroying all life upon the earth!

Hill heard his own hoarse voice asking. "Then your father is—is wiping out the human race?"

Theta De Spain nodded. "Of course, only 'exterminating' is a better word."

Again the taut silence locked Hill's lips. His nails bit deep into the palms of his hands. A bleak and bitter anger churned in his head. He couldn't talk to this girl, not now. There were too many words waiting to be said, words that finished him utterly. He knew that one life wouldn't matter, couldn't matter, to De Spain. Not when De Spain was destroying, in a single move, the entire civilization of the world!

Maybe this was a joke! Maybe De Spain and the girl were using him as the butt of some sadistic jest. But even as the thought ticked through his head Hill knew it wasn't a joke. No, it checked too perfectly. The heat wave, Terry's death, the suicides, and now this pat demonstration.

Steven Hill fought to keep his voice level, to keep the blinding hatred he felt out of the words. "I have a better picture of the whole thing now," he said.

"We'll go up to the next level, then. There is a lot you haven't seen yet."

Hill forced a smile on his lips. He hadn't had to plan. In a heartbeat of time the complete knowledge flared in his mind. He, Steven Hill, had to kill Alpha De Spain!

There was no doubt, could be no doubt. De Spain had to die! Hill knew that he would have to penetrate a web of protective devices to reach De Spain. That he would have to get a gun. That . . .

There were a thousand details that had to be worked out. They would be! And in the meantime he had to be nice, very nice, to Theta De Spain. She knew the way through her father's quarters, and past the detection eyes. She would be her father's passport to hell!

Steven Hill followed the girl back to the elevator. Nice, he had to be nice. He said: "I believe now that your father *is* the greatest scientific genius that ever lived."

"Thank you," she said pleasantly.

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Steven Hill smiled. Smiled, while black rage welled up within him, and his fingers itched for the feel of her throat. For anyone who bore the name of De Spain had to die!

CHAPTER VI

CHANCE AT ESCAPE

STEVEN HILL and Theta De Spain had reached "J" Level when the hourly bulletin from Washington was released.

"The heat wave, unparalleled in the history of man, today reached new heights. London reported a temperature of one-hundred twenty-eight degrees, and Paris was only two degrees cooler.

"All over the world, hospitals are jammed to capacity with heat victims, and still the death lists climb to staggering new totals. The tropical and semi-tropical countries have become almost uninhabitable. The weather station at Panama today recorded a temperature of one hundred and forty-one degrees.

"Tides, higher than any before known, continued to batter the Pacific coast. Florida counted its dead after the passage of a hurricane which raged over the whole state. Miami is in ruins."

"The beginning," Theta De Spain murmured. "Next month the temperatures will go over one hundred and fifty." She looked up at Hill. "The stables are down this way."

Hill paced silently at her side. Past hundreds of stalls of blooded cattle; past pens of poultry, a huge kennel, and an aviary. Always, the giant voice of the speaker horns followed them:

"Over two millions of known dead in the past three weeks. Health authorities advised that all water, however obtained, be boiled before using. Also, the police are rigidly enforcing the rule that all persons abroad in daylight must be fully clothed. Severe burns can result from only a few minutes' exposure to the sun's rays."

And always the black knowledge lay like a great weight in Hill's mind. It was murder—cold-blooded, ruthless mass murder! The War Lords had played children's games compared to this. Their cannon, gas, flame-guns, and rocket shells, down through the ages, had never taken human life on the scale planned by De Spain.

Cold sweat came out on Steven Hill's back. While the world raced to destruction *he* walked quietly beside De Spain's daughter!

He felt her eyes upon him then, and spoke because he knew he must. "But—but what if some people come through the heat? Isn't there some chance of that?"

Theta nodded. "Possibly, but the number will be very small. Father has taken that into consideration. There is a fleet of the world's fastest bombing ships in the hangar above us."

"Bombers?"

"Of course, to be sure that no one escapes. Nothing has been overlooked. The Ark is a good example of that, and you've seen most of it."

He had. The refrigeration units, four levels of them, where the four years' food supply was kept. The clothing supplies, the kitchen, the barracks, the machine shops, and the animal levels.

And what was more important, he'd seen a place where the sound lines could be tapped!

That much of his hour-old plan to kill Alpha De Spain had been taken care of. He knew, already, that no move could be made through the Ark's gleaming corridors without an order. He knew, too, that he could cut into the speaker system, could issue any needed order over it. The first step! But there were a hundred details yet to be fixed.

This slim and smiling girl was the only key to his puzzle. He tried carefully to draw her out.

"Then you know just what's going to happen in this new world?"

"Of course. Father and I have talked about it ever since I was a little girl. I think I could repeat it all, word for word."

A stiff smile touched Hill's lips. "Mind giving me a rough idea?"

"There are two or three possible locations for the final settlement, which will be built after the earth has been returned to its old orbit. None of the buildings now in existence will be usable. The action of the heat and cold will destroy most of them. The Twelve will act as a governing board, subject to father's decisions."

THEY were on a catwalk again, this time high above an exercise pen. Twenty or thirty horses grazed along a stream which curved through a grove of leafy trees.

"Father's very proud of this," Theta

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said. "The growth of the grass and trees can be controlled, and every morning there's fresh pasture."

Hill watched the play of expression around the girl's eyes. "The final settlement isn't what I meant; its details are easily taken care of with the equipment he's got. But about the other—the human element? Men will still be men; women will still be women, and you can't put them into formulas. That's where the rules go into the discard."

She shook her head. "No, you're wrong. All marriages will be made by the Twelve. Emotions won't enter into it at all, just science. That's what's wrong with the world now. Whims of men rule the destiny of nations. One man can plunge the world into a bloody, long-drawn war. One man can retard progress a thousand years." Color came into her cheeks, her voice was crisp. "That will never happen again, and in the next hundred years man will achieve more than he ever has before."

"Will men and women mingle in this new city?" Hill asked softly.

"Of course."

"And if a man and woman fall in love —then what?"

"They'll mingle, in everything but that."

He had begun to know this girl, had begun to see how her life had been shaped. Never away from her father. Never out of reach of that warped, malevolent intelligence. Her thought had been directed until it was a mirror-like image of Alpha De Spain's.

Hill found himself suddenly conscious of the curve of her cheek, of long-lashed eyes. He stepped close, his hands going out to her shoulders, his splayed fingers biting lightly into the warmly vibrant flesh. She turned. For a breathless second they stood that way, while the world narrowed to this tiny platform. To a single man and woman. To vivid lips, and gray eyes that were no longer coolly aloof.

She was in his arms, then, her slender body trembling against his. Her soft lips sweet under his kiss.

For possibly a dozen seconds they remained thus. "This—this is one thing your father forgot," Hill said huskily.

The words seemed to snap the spell. Theta De Spain twisted away, backed up until she was leaning against the guard rail. "We can't—" Color beat in waves in her cheeks. "We mustn't. I—I am already promised. My marriage is to be the first in the new world."

"Who is it?" Hill asked.

She drew herself up slim and straight. "I am to be married to Erich Bischoff."

"Bischoff!" Hill remembered a portrait which hung in the foyer of the Hall of Mathematics in De Spain University. A stooped, bearded, fox-faced little man. A hunchback, whose ape's arms and twisted legs had defied the best medical skill at birth. But nothing had dimmed the brilliance of his brain, and today Bischoff was the world's foremost mathematician.

Hill laughed harshly. "Bischoff! I didn't know he was here. I thought only perfect physical . . ."

"He *is* perfect." The tinkle of ice laced the words. "There is no taint in his blood, and his body is an accident that couldn't happen again in a million times."

"It's rotten, it's unclean!" The words burst from Hill's lips. "Your father is insane! He can't get away with this. The Ark will be wiped off the face of the earth as soon as the word gets to Washington."

Angry lights glinted in her eyes. "You don't know what you're saying. No disease, no war, no politics, nothing but the fine things, and you—" Her voice was a whip-lash. "Washington will never find out! And if they did it wouldn't matter. You've forgotten the fences—and they can kill at a distance of five miles. Shells can't hurt us at this depth, and our guns would clean the skies faster than they could send planes to attack."

"He *will* be stopped, if *I* have to stop him!"

Hill swayed there, fingers curling. Trapped! He knew that when he saw the flood of red creep into Theta's face. He'd said too much. Theta would report to De Spain.

"You will?" Theta was looking up at him.

She laughed, easy tinkling laughter that started the blood pounding in Hill's temples. "David and Goliath all over again, only David was well prepared beside you. I don't think father will lose any sleep."

"No," Hill ground out. "He won't, not now. Not after you tell him what I have said."

"Even David couldn't have been so childlike." Her hand came up. "Your elevator is at the end of this walk. You will have no trouble; it's audibly con-

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trolled. Goodby." She walked swiftly away.

Hill stayed there, standing stiff against the rail, until she had disappeared from sight. Death! That's all there was now. De Spain would order him killed as casually as he'd reach for a cigarette.

He was all through before he started.

THE Visa-phones would be on "A" Level; at least the controls would be there, and the same thing held true for the radio. There wasn't time to tap the speaker system now, and without an order "A" Level might as well have been the moon.

Escape! The thought went through Hill's brain like a racing flame. He had to get word to Washington that this madman was coolly, deliberately murdering the population of the world. He had to get out ahead of the guards who would be looking for him.

But how?

He was still wondering when he left the elevator on "B" Level. Twice, in the gleaming corridor, he passed guards. Big, uniformed men who wore Delta guns in hip holsters. Each time the hair on his neck crawled. Any minute now the horns would order him brought to "A" Level.

Hill went to the room that he shared with O'Day. He paused there only long enough to see that the big Irishman's flying clothes were gone, and to read the note propped against the mirror.

Another ferry job, son, back soon.
Brian.

Hill was sweating, then, his lips a bleak line. Somehow he'd expected O'Day to help. And yet, O'Day must know what was happening, and he must approve or De Spain wouldn't have trusted him as a contact man.

"Special order!" The impersonal voice of the speaker horns brought Hill up with a start. "Van Dyne to 'G' Level at six-one, to report to Norman. Borsi to the surface Level at six-eleven to make contact flight to Missoula. Jackson to dynamo Level at six-eighteen, to report to . . ."

Hill was already moving down the corridor. He hadn't been in the Ark long enough to be well known, and if he wasn't in his quarters when the order came out he might have a chance. A thin chance. Sooner or later they'd catch him, but until they did, he'd do his best.

He went along a ramp, and down past another row of doors. He was turning the corner when he saw the man in front of him. Borsi! And then, in a single desperate instant, he saw the way.

His eyes dropped to his watch. Six-o-one. He lengthened his stride, called. "Borsi, just a minute, I want to tell you something."

Borsi swung around, swart face darkening. "You, huh, an' what do you want?"

Hill was beside him. "Listen, Borsi," he said swiftly, "I'm sorry about that crack in the face. I didn't know you were ribbing me and I lost my head."

"Yes?" Borsi's eyes receded in a dark scowl. "Well, listen, guy. I'm too smart for that. You know I'm goin' out an' you want me to bring something in for you. Well, you'll have to think of a better squeeze than that."

Hill didn't hear the words. His glance flicked up and down the corridor. Empty. Borsi's raw voice brought Hill's eyes back to the swart man. Maybe. The size was close enough, and Borsi's flying jacket had a high collar.

"I'm askin' you for the last time," Borsi snarled. "What do you want?"

Hill said, "This!" and pivoted smoothly from the hips. The swart man's eyes widened, but he never had a chance. Hill's fist swept through Borsi's half-raised hands to his jaw. There was the sodden smack of bone on flesh. Borsi took a quick backward step, his legs tangled, and he fell heavily.

A taut instant, while Hill crouched there waiting. Nothing moved along the shining length of the corridor. Hill was on top of Borsi then, heaving him erect, pushing him through one of the small doors. His luck held. The room was empty.

Seconds slipped away. Hill propped Borsi upright, and worked his jacket off. His breath caught in his throat at the sight of the chest strap, the shoulder holster! A gun—great God, his luck was in—a black, wickedly compact Delta gun.

Hill checked the fifty-shot clip. Really deadly, these Delta guns. The fat barrel was cushioned against recoil, and had the bulge of the liquid tank above the chamber. That liquid was another of De Spain's early inventions. Only a spark would explode it, and it eliminated powder and the cartridge case.

The bullets were fed from the handle clip, the liquid from above. A tiny battery supplied the spark. No bigger than

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the old-fashioned six-shot pistols, a Delta gun in the hands of an expert was as efficient as a machine gun.

No time for the holster. Hill jammed his arms into the sleeves, slipped the gun into his pocket. Borsi's cap was a little tight, but with the coat collar up around his face there was a chance.

Six-o-nine!

Hill strode down the corridor toward the elevators, head down, shoulders hunched. His wary eyes raked the way ahead. Once he stopped to light a cigarette and to allow two big guards to cross to the lounge. Only one man spoke to him on the way. Hill growled something deep in his throat, and kept moving. The gun butt was slippery in his hand, and sweat ran cold down his back.

THE THIRTY-second wait at the elevator was years long. Then the doors were closing behind him. He was clinging to the hand rail, bending his knees to absorb the starting shock as the elevator rocketed upward.

Hill mopped his face. Halfway there. Timing and luck, everything depended on them.

The doors snapped back, and Hill's heels clicked across the floor of the huge hangar. His breath hissed over stiff lips. He was trying—no man could do more. There was still the gun. The fifty-shot clip could turn this place into a hell if it became necessary.

The horns overhead came suddenly to life: "Borsi out in number six."

A red, stubby-winged plane, like the one O'Day had flown, rolled across the floor to stop near the door. The motor was thr-rumping easily, the propeller a dull silver disc. A white-jumpered mechanic appeared in the plane's door, dropped to the floor.

The mechanic waved at Hill, shouted: "She's right, guy, kick her outa here."

Hill nodded, slowed his stride. The man was only ten feet away. If he got a look at Hill's shadowed face and gave the alarm, it was over. Death would come into that cavern in the space of a single heartbeat.

A nerve-sawing, year-long second, and then the man turned. "Hell, you pilots think you're pretty fancy. Get goin', guy, get goin'!"

Hill climbed in, dropped into the pilot's seat, fumbled with the unfamiliar controls. The doors swung up and open. He belted himself in the seat, cracked the throttle. The red ship rolled out into the hot, bright glare of the sun.

Free! The Ark was dropping behind at two-hundred miles an hour as the plane streaked down the runway. Hill eased the stick back. The plane rocketed upward, slid off on one wing. Desperately, he righted the ship. This was like riding a bolt of lightning. He had never flown a ship with half this power, half this speed. He didn't breath deeply until the altimeter read eighteen thousand.

Hill set a northeast course, switched on the automatic pilot, and leaned forward to the radio. A bleak curse spilled from his lips. The sending set broadcast on a fixed wave-length, and anything he said would be picked up by De Spain.

The radio, then, was out. De Spain would have planes on his trail soon enough without that. No use underestimating the intelligence of that smiling devil on "A" Level. Sooner or later the red ships would find him. But before they did he had to get word to Washington. He had to.

Scant minutes, and the Helena airport was below him. Hill took the ship down, hunched and sweating over the supersensitive controls. The wheels touched. The ship yawed, bounced crazily. Hill cut the throttle, dropped the wing flaps, and walked the wheel brakes. The red ship slewed to a rocking stop.

Two uniformed men met him as he dropped into the blazing sunlight. The squat, red-faced men shouted: "Hey, you! Who the hell do you think you are? How many times do we have to tell you not to come in without clearance?"

Hill said: "One side, guy, I've got to get Washington on the phone."

"Yes?" The squat man caught Hill's arm. "You can come talk to the dispatcher, too. This call can wait."

"You, fool!" Hill pushed the words past stiff lips. "The world is coming to an end if I don't stop it!"

Bright anger came into the squat man's eyes. "Will ya listen to the guy? The world's comin' to an end. Huh, that's a new one."

"Save it!" Hill twisted free of the squat man's grip. Shouts rose behind him as he sprinted toward the administration building.

"Stop that guy, he's crazy! The heat's got him."

Hill stiff-armed the door open, raced across the lobby. Down a ramp, and around a corner to the Communications

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Office. A sleepy-eyed girl looked up from the switchboard.

"Get me Washington!" Hill dropped a crumpled wad of bills on the counter. "Get me the president!"

The girl blinked. "There was a senator tried that yesterday, an' it took me two hours to put the call through. What's the name please?"

Hill stiffened. His name meant nothing, and unless he could get to someone who knew what was happening, his story would sound like an insane dream.

"Get me," he said bleakly, "the editor of the biggest newspaper in this town."

"Right. Booth two."

THE SCREEN was already glowing when Hill stepped into the booth. An image flickered there, sharpened. Tired eyes looked at Hill out of worn, deeply lined face. A voice asked harshly: "What's on your mind?"

Hill said: "The biggest story that ever broke. You've got to get in touch with the president right away. You've got to tell him that I've found the man who's pulling the world off the old orbit. The man who's murdering the population of the world."

"What!"

"That's right. The world is swinging in close to the sun."

The tired face was turned away from him, the harsh voice said, "Another heat victim, Joe. They're gettin' thicker than flies."

Hill said: "You—you've got to."

The screen went black.

He raced back to the counter. "Get me Charles Beck of Universal Newscasting in New York," he snapped at the girl. "Say that Steve Hill is calling with the answer to Terry's death. Tell him that, and for the love of God, get goin'!"

"Yes, sir." Her lips trembled, and her eyes were no longer sleepy.

Hill went back to the booth. Why hadn't he thought of this before? Beck would believe him, and Beck would see that the news reached the right place.

The screen spluttered and crackled. Dimly, he could hear the voice of the operator saying, "Calling Mr. Beck at Universal Newscasting. Calling. . . ." Steven Hill smiled.

"Don't move, son!"

The soft voice, coming from behind, jerked Hill savagely erect. He pivoted swiftly to see O'Day in the doorway. The big Irishman's mouth was as grim as the Delta gun he pointed at Hill's stomach.

The taut silence stretched thin, and then O'Day said: "So, you had to be a fool."

"Yes." Hill's hand twitched toward his pocket, stopped as O'Day's finger whitened on the trigger.

"Don't do it," the Irishman said, "don't even think about it. I don't want to kill you—don't make me." He stepped close, lifted the gun from Hill's pocket.

The voice of the screen said: "Mr. Beck asks that you wait just a moment, please."

"So I'm just in time, son." O'Day stepped back. "Come on, we're leaving." He tucked both guns out of sight in his jacket. "Walk ahead of me."

Hill obeyed. The switchboard girl called after them, "Your call is on the screen now, sir."

"Cancel it," O'Day ordered, and prodded Hill up the ramp. He didn't speak again until they were out in the fierce sunlight, walking toward the twin red ships.

"Look at 'em come. Four ships in sight, and more on the way. You thought you could swipe one of De Spain's ships. Hell, he's got a direction finder that works on some metal in the planes. He could tell your direction, air-speed, and exact location at any time. I was close when the order was broadcast. I damn near wrecked my crate getting here first."

"Another minute," Hill ground out, "and it wouldn't have made any difference."

O'Day grinned, "So you want to die, son? Well, maybe Mr. 'A' will fix that too."

"He would have anyway."

One of the red ships was dropping in to land. O'Day's voice was a fast whisper. "I had to get here first. Now, don't interrupt till I get through. There isn't much time. First, get out of that jacket, quick. We'll stop here, an' you heave it back of that car. In the meantime, listen. You slugged Borsi—that's his coat—but that wasn't reported over the air. Borsi must've had some reason for keeping it quiet." He paused, and his brows pulled down. "I get it—you lifted that gun off Borsi. Right?"

Hill nodded.

"I knew you didn't have one. I put you under a metal detector ray when I took you in, and your baggage was searched." He grinned. "This doesn't make it so bad, my boy. Well, will you look what's comin'?"

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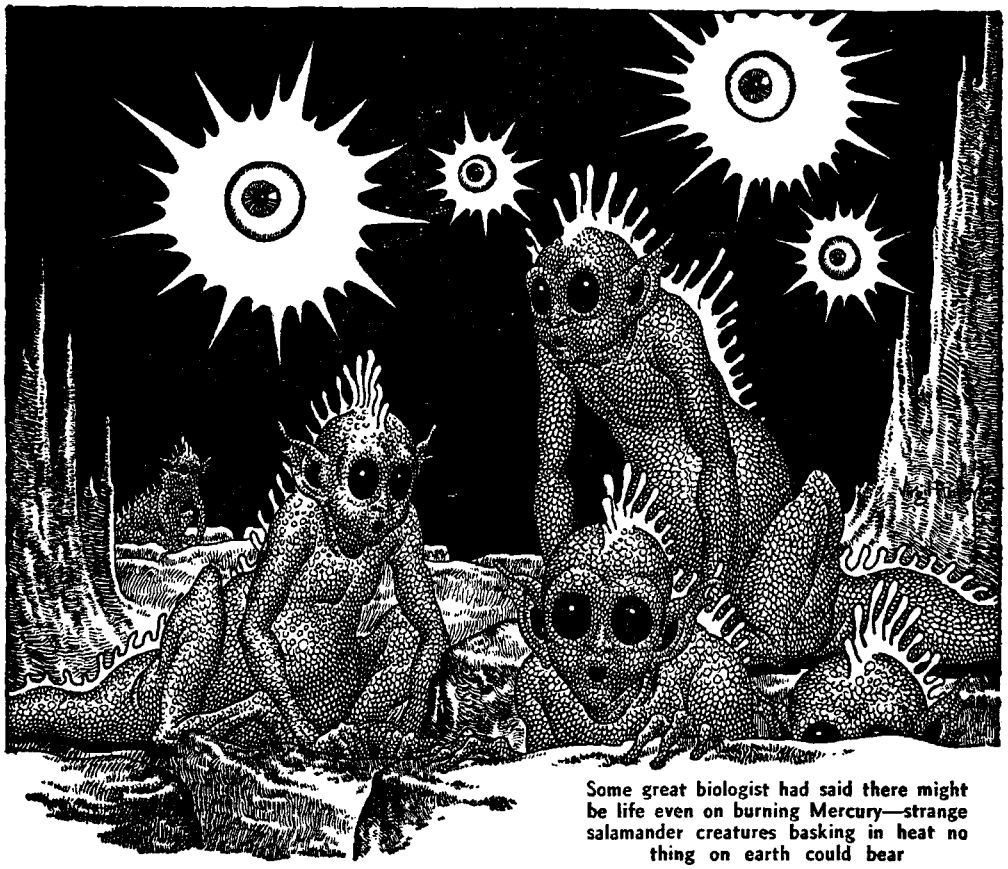

Some great biologist had said there might be life even on burning Mercury—strange salamander creatures basking in heat no thing on earth could bear

THERE was no mistaking the lean man who trotted toward them. Borsi. Bareheaded, jacketless, his dark face twisted into an angry mask. One hand out of sight inside his shirt.

O'Day's voice stopped the swart man ten feet away. "Take your hand off that gun, Borsi, or I'll drop you as sure as you're livin'!"

Borsi's hand came out, empty. "Hey, I'm only doin' a job. I didn't recognize you, and I thought he might be armed."

"Sure," O'Day drawled, "and where would he be getting a gun?"

Just then two more of the red ships were swooping down on the field. O'Day's voice was chill. "Pick up that jacket, Borsi. You're goin' to forget that you ever lost it, an' Hill's goin' to forget all about that fifty-shot Delta gun."

"You can't prove anything!"

"I don't have to; if De Spain hears a rumor about a free gun floating around, he'll prove it himself."

The purple bruise on Borsi's jaw showed almost black against the sudden pallor of his skin. He gulped, "Any way you want it will be plenty all right with me."

"Good!" O'Day's eyes went beyond the flyer to the red ships which were taxiing to a stop beside the others. "You and I and Hill will all go back in one ship. There will be men enough to fly the other two back. We'll have time to talk it over on the way, and until we do, you keep your mouth shut. Come on, I've got to report."

Borsi waited only long enough to slip into his uniform jacket. The three of them went back toward the ships.

Five minutes later all four of the red ships were in the air, winging southwest. O'Day let Borsi do the flying while he talked to Hill.

"Listen, son, here's your story. You didn't know you weren't supposed to leave. You just happened along when the elevator opened, and there was a plane waiting. You wanted to get in touch with some friends of yours to try and get them in the Ark, but I got there before

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you'd had time. I'll back you on that part of it. Borsi won't say anything about the uniform. Having a gun of your own's as big a crime as stealing one of the ships.

"Pray for luck, and tell your story well the first time. That way, he won't put you under the Lie Detector. If he does that you're all through. Get it?"

Hill nodded. He'd try, sure, but what was the use. Theta De Spain knew all the answers before her father began the questioning. What chance was there? Steven Hill leaned back against the seat, the bitter anger burning deep inside him as the red ship roared into the southwest.

CHAPTER VII

HAVOC

ALPHA DE SPAIN sat in the deep chair at the head of the long, low table. He was leaning forward, elbows on the smooth wood, chin propped in cupped hands.

Six of the twelve chairs along the length of the table were filled. Hill, O'Day, and Borsi were standing near the arched doorway. Theta De Spain watched from a chair behind her father's.

"O'Day," De Spain purred, "your report, please."

"Yes, sir." O'Day took two steps forward. "I was in the air when the radio message was broadcast at six twenty-four." I changed my course, and went to the Helena airport. I found Steven Hill there, in the Communications Office. The other ships arrived there almost at once. We returned here."

A warning light flickered in De Spain's eyes. "Had he made contact with anyone?"

O'Day shook his head. "No, sir, I checked with the operator to be sure."

"That's all." De Spain straightened. "Now, Mr. Borsi, your reason for being late for your six-eleven flight, please."

Hill's eyes swept the table as Borsi stepped forward. Six of the Twelve were there. Six of the dozen men who were to rule the new world. De Spain's eyes glowed green under lowered lids, and Theta's oval face was sober.

"I was two seconds late, sir," Borsi was saying. "I arrived just as the elevator door was closing. By the time I could get to the surface my ship was gone."

"So? You were two seconds late. If I were you, Mr. Borsi, I would listen more closely to the orders. The time mentioned in them, is the time meant."

"Yes, sir."

"Now, Mr. Hill," De Spain's voice was scarcely audible, "will you please be good enough to explain your sudden departure?"

"Yes, sir." Cold sweat started on Hill's back as he stepped forward. Damn this purring devil, and his cat-and-mouse tactics. "I thought the elevators from 'B' Level to the surface were audibly controlled. I had asked for an elevator, and the door opened for me. I rode to the surface, found a plane waiting, and took off."

"Didn't it seem a bit strange to you that your slightest wish be anticipated in this fashion?"

"I suppose it should have, sir," Hill said slowly. He could feel Theta's eyes upon his face. Why didn't she speak? What was she waiting for? "I might have, but I'd already seen so many strange things here that I accepted it without much thought."

"And why were you cutting your stay short?"

"I wasn't, sir," Hill lied. "I was trying to contact two of my college friends to tell them to apply for admittance here."

"And who are these friends?"

The soft voice flicked at Hill like a lash. He wanted to launch himself in a dive the length of that table. Wanted to feel De Spain's throat under his fingers. Damn the man! Why did he play with him this way?

"We're waiting, Hill?"

"Yes, sir. They are a Jay Forbes, who is an honor student in Advanced Communications; and a Miss Penelope Martin, an honor student in Advanced Commercial Art. Both have excellent minds, backgrounds, and other qualifications."

"I *am* sorry, Hill, but our lists are complete."

There was a tightness in Hill's throat, his splayed fingers were pressed hard against his legs. "Would it do any good, sir, if their records were forwarded to you?"

"None at all." De Spain's face might have been carved from stone. "All the money in the world couldn't buy a place in the Ark. No man is great enough to force his way in." A gray smile curved his lips. "That is all. The findings of the committee will be read over the speaker system."

Hill turned with the others and moved toward the arched doorway. Theta De

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Spain's face was the last thing he saw in that room. He face, her vivid lips, and her dark, questioning eyes.

The elevator was waiting for them at the end of the blue-walled hall. Hill started to speak as they entered, but O'Day's crushing grip on his arm stopped the words in his throat.

THE IRISHMAN silently led the way to their quarters. "Sorry, but there was an ear in that elevator. You might as well talk to De Spain himself."

"Then—then there might be one in here," Hill said.

"There is," O'Day grinned. "I helped build these rooms, and put the ears in—only I put a cut-out switch on this one." He closed the door, stretched out on the bed. "I think you're in the clear, son. Your story's just cockeyed enough to be true. If De Spain'd had any doubts he'd have put you under the Detector, and you'd have been all through. You've got luck."

"Not much," Hill retorted bitterly. "The bombing fleet would be here now if I did have."

"You're a fool." The Irishman grinned. "A brave fool, maybe, but still a fool. Why do you want to die? This is going to be a pretty nice little world when we get it fixed up. You couldn't do anything anyway; why not go with the crowd?"

Deep lines bracketed Hill's mouth, unbelief clouded his voice. "You—you can't mean that. Good God, man, he's wiping out every living thing in the world! Men, women, children—everything. Surely you must." He stopped, and then went on in a tight, choked voice, "What—what kind of a man are you?"

"An old man, almost old enough to be your father. I don't owe the world a thing. My mother and father were killed in the Yellow Invasion. I've flown in a dozen wars, and I've seen the works—the whole rotten picture. It'll be a cleaner, better place when the leeches that run this world are dead. Call it tough that the rest of them have to die too—maybe they'll be better off, for there is another war in the making. Money is the only thing that counts out there. Even— Even with—"

O'Day's chill voice held Hill silent.

"Money! My wife left me because a thousand a month wasn't enough. She was a flirt anyway, but she took Peter Paul with her. I was flying in South America then. She was smart; she tried to cover up, but I found her. A fat butler tried to keep me out of her penthouse, and her smart visitor pulled a gun on me after I got in. The butler got off easy—I broke his jaw. That was a night. I fixed that place up right. There were a million cops on the way when Peter Paul and I left. De Spain sent for me then. I was glad to come."

"Peter Paul?"

"My son; he's five now."

"Is he here?"

"No, his mother wasn't the kind of a woman who could get in here. That barred him."

"But. . . ."

"Shut up, damn you!" O'Day was sitting up, his face twisted, his fingers working. "You're alive, isn't that enough? For the love of Heaven stop asking questions!"

Hill stared at O'Day's sweat-streaked face, at the odd brightness in the big man's eyes. Then he turned away without a word.

The bulletin came just short of ten o'clock.

"Special orders resulting from committee hearing: O'Day to report to Surface Level for flight at five thirty-two a.m.; Borsi to report to Machine Shop Level at eight-fifteen a.m.; Hill to report to McCoy on Dynamo Level at eight-fifteen a.m. No further action."

Hill's eyes found O'Day's face.

"You're in the clear," the Irishman said.

Hill leaned forward, his voice hot, low. "Listen, O'Day, I want that gun you took away from me."

"It's gone. I dropped it overboard on the way back from Helena. We were in enough trouble without taking that chance. I turned the other one in, as usual, but the little one's gone." O'Day lit a cigarette. "You wouldn't have got it anyway. It would have been your ticket to hell!"

Ridges of muscle worked along the clean line of Hill's jaw. He pivoted, without speaking, and went out of the room.

Two Sho-jet tables were running in the lounge. Hill joined the crowd that was banked, four deep, around the players. He watched the swift movement of the red ball, and the precise flutter of the betting discs. A tall, red-headed man was winning, and his laughter followed Hill as he moved toward the news-casting screens.

An air view filled one of those screens,

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a view that moved like a swiftly unreeling strip of film. Here, an ill-lighted, storm-pounded coastal town, and the foaming white of the giant breakers that swept over the sea wall. A freight ship sank before his eyes, and a dozen small boats were battered to kindling in half as many seconds. Then, a road choked with laden cars. Refugees!

"The tide now sweeping the Pacific Coast is the highest ever known." It was the announcer's quick voice.

The Pacific Coast! That meant that Mike James' crew were broadcasting that scene. Then Jay Forbes was in the plane!

JAY FORBES settled the headset over his ears. He listened to the sharp beat of the announcer's voice without hearing the words, and then leaned forward to tune out the murmur of the plane engine.

The moon-faced announcer was five feet ahead of him, face down over a glass floor panel. Jay watched the moving circle of the plane's searchlights crawl along the coast-line, and spilled crisp words into a small hand microphone.

Forbes was watching when the announcer raised his hand. He flicked the switch that cut in the noise of the storm outside, and reached for his cigarettes.

The announcer came to his side. "Get me the chief, Jay." He was pale, shaken. "Did you see that freighter go down back there? Like a tin can instead of a ship. Give me one of those cigarettes."

Forbes turned the power out-put up, and worked the blinker switch. Three thousand miles away, on the master-board in the control room of Universal Newscasting, a warning eye blinked red.

"Pick it up, James." The voice came from the board speaker.

Forbes nodded, and James pulled the microphone close. "Chief, I don't think this ship can take much more of this weather. Paul thinks we better get down. The elevator controls are getting sluggish."

"Can you hold out for five minutes?"

"Right."

"That'll dove-tail you with Number Two. They're comin' on with a water riot in Central France. Call me as soon as you're on the ground."

"Right." James' hand dropped, and Forbes flicked the cut-off switch. The announcer grinned down at him, sucked cigarette smoke deep into his lungs. "How do you like it, guy?"

Forbes said: "When I've got a yell, I'll make it plenty loud. What the devil, this's better than sellin' ice or. . . ." He broke off as a blue light flashed on his board. "Hey! There goes the port searchlight, Mike! Now what?"

"Step the other one up, Jay. I'll ask Paul what's the matter. There's a floor panel under you. Switch the cover back, and get something into the mike."

"Hey, I'm no announcer!"

"You are now." James whirled, ducked away toward the pilot's quarters.

Jay Forbes cupped the hand mike close to his lips, stared down at the fan of white light that reeled down the beach.

"Below us," he said tersely, "is the full evidence of the fury of the sea. Whole towns along this coast have been wiped out as completely as though they'd never been here. Every major city has suffered damages which will run into millions of dollars. The loss of human life is even more appalling. This storm struck without warning, and there was no time for those living near the beaches to vacate. All roads leading inland are. . . ."

Forbes talked, while his eyes followed that moving finger of light. Two iscanascopes set in the wings picked up everything shown by that light. Roaring, white-crested seas, wrecked houses, and a boat floating bottom up. Here, a flashing glimpse of a building falling, almost gravely, into the sea. Forbes' breath caught in his throat. There had been time to see the tiny figures atop that building before the light flicked away. Men and women who had fled there for safety. The battering tidal wave had undermined the building, and now . . . Forbes pulled his eyes away.

The announcer was back, then, taking the microphone out of Forbes' hand. "Two minutes, an' we're goin' down. Watch it!"

Forbes nodded, and automatically adjusted the volume control. The announcer's voice ran on, a tight, meaningless drone, in his headset.

The plane was thundering over Long Beach now. The docks, the auditorium, the hotel, and business blocks which fronted on the sea were in ruins. A black, snub-nosed sedan flashed along an elevated highway only to be tossed over and over, like an empty matchbox, by a licking sea.

East, toward Los Angeles, skimming low over roads that were choked with cars and buses in a roaring chaos. Over a fly-

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ing field where a small plane was racing, wide-open, into the face of the wind in a vain attempt to get off the ground. The wing fabric whipped loose. The struts showed bare as the small ship nosed over and crashed. A burst of orange flame marked the spot.

Los Angeles. Rain-wet buildings, streets that were running feet-deep in water. Giant searchlights probing the heavy sky with white fingers.

Then, the announcer's upraised hand was signaling the cut-off. Forbes leaned over the controls again, the announcer's words plain in his headset:

"Chief, Mike James reporting. We're taking our ship down to see what's wrong. I'll call you as soon as we know."

The board speaker said: "Right."

The plane slanted down. Forbes had plenty to do. Both microphones had to be stowed in their rubber-lined cases; the controls had to be covered with crash pads.

He had barely finished when James was at his side, shouting: "Brace yourself, she's going to be sloppy."

It was. The wheels touched, and sheets of muddy water drenched the plane. The jar threw Forbes hard against the seat. The engine thunder rose again, as the plane slewed around, lumbered toward an open hangar.

A MOMENT later Forbes and James dropped to the hangar floor, as the two pilots came down their ladders. Paul Grey was the first man to the floor. James slapped his shoulder.

"You really set her down, Paul. Hell, I haven't seen anything better than that since—"

"Stow it, Mike, we've still got to get this crate back in the air." The pilot looked years older than his thirty-five. A two-day stubble darkened his cheeks, and his eyes were red, bloodshot. "You guys hunt up some fuel, and Tony and I'll see what's wrong with the light, and why the elevators are sluggish."

The co-pilot, a slim, dark man, stood there brushing at his eyes. "Mike, we're flying again tonight. Good God, it's been a week since I've seen a bed. I'm dead for sleep."

"You're working for Universal," Grey snapped. "Get that idea about sleep out of your head."

"Right." Tony moved after him. "And I'm the guy who turned down a job flying a freighter."

Forbes superintended the fueling. Grey and Tony worked over the wing searchlight, and then went back to the tail assembly. Mike James went with them, and a moment later climbed into the plane cabin again. He was back on the ground by the time the fuel truck had rolled away.

"Bad news," he said tersely. "The chief wants us to be in Washington, D.C., by eight a.m. tomorrow."

Grey got a cigarette out of a crumpled pack. "Yes," he said quietly, "what's happened?"

"Crew Six has disappeared. The relief men couldn't find a trace of them. The chief's got to have a crew there to catch the speech the President promised to make some time this week."

Grey's face didn't change. His hands were steady as he brought the lighter flame to his cigarette. "Then why doesn't the relief crew take that job?"

"They can't, Paul, they've got to replace Crew Two. Six or eight hundred peasants mobbed their plane, and wrecked the equipment. A couple of the boys are dead. Water riot. The peasants thought they'd find water in the plane."

Grey nodded. "Sure, and we hop clear across the country on a dirty night. Well, get some food aboard, and let's get goin'. I'll get her off, and take the first two hours. Then one of you guys can take over while I get a little sleep. All you'll have to do is watch the automatic pilot do the work."

"You can't," the co-pilot said. "We'll stack this ship up. You'd need a flying boat to get off this field."

"Universal men don't die in bed." Grey might have been talking about the weather. "Come on, Tony, we're checkin' over the motors, and then we're rollin' out of here."

Crash stations. All instruments shielded. The first rule for all Universal planes when taking off a dangerous field.

Forbes draped the crash pads over the control board, belted himself in his seat. The big motors blasted their full-throated song of power, the ship wheeled around. Then, they were lumbering through the wash of the floodlights, down the rutted, flooded field. The take-off light winked green. The ship bounced, rocked, and then staggered into the air. Thunderous motor sound, and yet the ship rose with maddening slowness. Buildings dead ahead.

James' face was white. "Come on,

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Paul," he whispered, "pick this pig up. Pick it up!"

Forbes could have sworn that the wing surfaces scraped the roof. The next time he looked down through the glass floor panel the ground lights were only ruddy pin points.

James was clutching Forbes' arm. "Is he good, or is he good? Who else could have got this crate out of that mudhole down there?"

The flight was an hour old when Paul Grey came back into the main cabin. A cigarette drooped from one corner of his mouth, and his young-old face was gray with fatigue.

"Are you goin' to call the chief tonight?"

"Sure," James said, "I'll have to report. Did you want something?"

"Yes. Tony needs a rest. Tell the chief to have a new man in Washington to relieve him. Tony's a good man, but these long stretches get him. A week'll put him back on his feet."

An odd smile pulled at James' mouth. "Sure, and how about you? Tony's been on the rocks for a week. You've been doing all the flying."

"Tony's a good man," Grey said bleakly. "Let it go at that." He turned, trailing cigarette smoke over his shoulders. "Send some coffee up, will you?"

Forbes looked up at James as he uncovered the control board. James grinned down at him. "Yes, I know, you're wondering who's running this crew. I am, fella, but I'll take any suggestion that guy wants to make. He'll keep us movin' when the rest of the crews are in the hangar. They don't come any better."

Forbes worked the blinker switch. A moment's wait, and then the board speaker said, "Pick it up, James."

"En route to Washington, Chief. Have a new co-pilot on hand to relieve Tony."

"You'll be in Washington two or three days," the speaker said; "that will give him time to catch some sleep."

"Two or three days, Chief, that's swell."

"Right. Report to Dave Williams at the airport. He'll give you the set-up."

"Chief, I—" James broke off as Forbes plucked at his sleeve. "Just a minute." He switched the microphone off, asked, "What do you want?"

"If—if we're going to be in Washington for a couple of days I'd like to get a message through to my fiancée."

James shook his head. "You know better than that."

"Listen, we want to get married, and this might be the last chance for a long time. I. . . ."

"So!" James grinned. "Now Universal plays cupid." He turned back to the microphone. "Chief, this new man you sent me wants to use this two days stop to get married. He wants to get word to the girl now."

The speaker said: "Why not? Put him on."

Laughter light showed in James' eyes as he pushed the microphone into Forbes' hand.

Forbes said, then, "I'd like to get in touch with Miss Penelope Martin, at De Spain University, please."

CHAPTER VIII

THE PRESIDENT SPEAKS

STEVEN HILL stood on the slender catwalk, and looked up at the two mechanics who were working on the unit of four speaker horns near the ceiling. Far below him, row on row of huge dynamos snarled endlessly.

One of the mechanics came slowly down the ladder. "We changed the circuit," he said, "and if you're right, that fixes it. How about a test?"

Hill plugged in a test-phone, and an impersonal voice said, "Yes?"

"Checking speaker horns on Dynamo Level. Give us a test."

"Right." There was a moment's wait, and then the giant's voice of the horn said: "Steven Hill to 'B' Level Visa-phone, at once. Steven Hill to 'B' Level Visa-phone, at once."

The mechanic blinked. "Talk about service. . . ."

The voice in Hill's headphone said, "Get it? That came through just in time to use."

"Then it wasn't a test?"

"No, that's an order, Hill. Get under way."

Brian O'Day was the first man Hill saw when the elevator doors snapped open on 'B' Level. The big flyer snapped: "I heard the order, son, the Visa-phone's this way."

"Hey," Hill said softly, "the Visa-phone means it's from outside. I didn't think De Spain would let me. . . ."

"That's why I came. I had to warn you. He'll be using delay coil on you, and if you say anything he doesn't like it'll never get past the board. Watch it,

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son. You might as well be talking to 'Mr. A' himself."

Hill said: "Thanks."

O'Day led the way down a silver-walled hall to stop in front of a narrow door. "In here."

"Come on in," Hill said, and went past the flyer into a small room. The Visagrid was already glowing; a cone of hot, white light spilled down from the ceiling, and the scanning tubes shone blue on either side of the screen.

A voice came out of the blank white screen: "A call for Steven Hill from Washington, D.C. You will limit yourself to answers satisfactory to the Twelve, or the connection will be broken."

Hill said: "Right."

A double image leaped into being upon the screen. Two faces, side by side, looked out at him. Jay Forbes' unforgettable, homely grin, and Penny Martin's warm, soft smile. A tightness gripped Hill's throat. He tried to make his voice light.

"Hello, mugs. How come you bother a workingman on a busy day?"

"A surprise, Steve," Penny whispered.

"Hey," Forbes growled, "you wouldn't know what a busy day is. We've had three hours to buy flowers, the ring, the wedding dress, and to hire a minister. And now you get a ringside seat. Watch, fella, and listen to my knees."

"You're . . . You're. . . ."

"Check. This is our wedding day. Universal gave me six hours off."

Penny and Jay turned then, at right angles to the screen, and a third profile showed there. That of a silvery-haired, gentle-mouthed old man, who held a Bible in his hands.

"Dearly beloved," the soft words burned deep in Hill's mind, *"we are gathered here. . . ."*

Hill's fingers curled, until the nails bit deep into his palms. He blinked suddenly as stinging moisture flooded his eyes.

"Do you, Penelope Martin, take this man. . . ."

Married! Two of the grandest people God ever put breath into. Sure, reaching for a clock-tick of happiness that wasn't there. Not even that was left. Not now. Tomorrow the temperature would go up and up. Each hour brought the unescapable closer.

"Do you, Jay Forbes, take this woman."

How long could it last? How fast was the earth rushing toward the sun? Damn De Spain! Hot, angry words flooded inside of him. If he could warn them!

"Steady!" O'Day's taut whisper came from behind.

Steady! Sweat started on Hill's back. A bitter inner voice whispered through his mind. "They'd hate you if they knew. Even Penny would hate a coward!"

" . . . till death do you part."

What a hollow mockery that was! Today, tomorrow. A bare handful of seconds, that's all they had left. Seconds. Time for a smile. A little bright laughter.

Gentle, age-old words. *"I now pronounce you man and wife."*

They were smiling at him then. Hill swayed. "Lots of luck, you two. All the best. You've got it coming."

"Sure." Forbes grinned. "We've got the house all picked out, and as soon as this heat wave's over we'll get some time off."

Ridges of muscles worked along the clean line of Hill's jaw. "Right, mugs, but how am I going to kiss the bride?"

"You're not, guy; why do you think I fixed it this way?" Forbes turned. "Look." He held up a fat bottle. "Wine, a hundred years old. Sorry, I can't reach you. But listen, you've got a glass of wine there. We can still drink our toast."

Hill heard himself saying, "That's right; if you'll just wait a minute. . . ."

"Here, son." O'Day was beside him, pushing a thin-stemmed glass into his hand.

Their laughter and voices reached Hill like something from a dream. The cork popped, and sparkling wine splashed into two glasses. It was Penny who spoke, eyes shining.

"May we live forever. . . ."

The words were flat and bitter on Hill's lips, "May you live forever. . . ."

Softly spoken, the toast seemed to roll like a thunderclap through the small room. "May you live forever, and I never die!"

Forever! The wineglass shattered in Hill's contracting hand. He didn't feel the pain as the glass ripped the flesh, nor the quick warm flow of blood.

A month, and Washington would be a smoking ruin. A month, and the living would be wasted skeletons. Penny, too.

"So long, fella." Forbes' hand came up in a half salute. "We're covering the president's speech tonight at eight-thirty. You might catch it. I'll be on the controls."

"I will." Hill forced a smile. "So long, kids."

Their faces blurred and faded.

Hill swore, deep harsh curses that

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welled up from down deep in his throat.

THE RECREATION room was jammed when Hill and O'Day came in, five minutes before the speech was due. Chairs and lounges had been pushed into rows, and every seat was taken. Two sound engineers raised the screens so they would be visible from all over the room.

The hum of voices died when the screens came to life. Three walls, a desk, and a single man were pictured there. A big man, whose good-boned, clean-jawed face was known to every American. James G. Kingston, the president of the United States!

The image grew until only Kingston's face showed upon the screens. Pain lines bracketed his mouth, webbed the skin around his eyes. His lips were tight, gray.

"Never, since the beginning of life upon this globe, has any man had a more hopeless message to give his fellow men." His voice was throaty, low—the voice of a man fighting to control raw nerves. "Two months ago we first had word of an impending disaster, so great that it was beyond belief. I deliberately withheld that information until it could be checked.

"It has been checked, and found to be horribly true. This is the first public announcement, and if what I have to say seems impossible, remember this—every scientist in the world confirms our findings.

"Two months ago the earth deviated from the orbit it had used for countless millions of years in its course around the sun. That tiny deviation was noticed at once by our astronomers, who reported it to me. Each successive day has made it only too plain what the ultimate result will be. There is no need, here, to go into the actual figures. It is sufficient to say that the earth's new course will take it much closer to the sun than ever before. So close that the temperature will rise to unlivable heights!

"Unlivable heights! Those two words alone forecast the end of the human race. The end of all life on the face of this planet. Our human bodies cannot withstand temperatures of six hundred degrees—and those temperatures will be common before another sixty days have passed."

The big room was so quiet that Kingston's breathing was audible from the newscasting screens.

"You, within the reach of my voice, will find this hard to believe—at first. It is true in every detail.

"This message will be repeated throughout the world, by the governing heads of the various countries, within the next twenty-four hours. There will be fear, of course, for never before has man faced extinction. I can only ask you, all of you, to meet this disaster with courage. We cannot live, for the heat will kill all life upon the face of the earth. I repeat: The heat will kill all life upon the face of the earth.

"Tonight, at midnight, the United States of America goes under military law. This step is necessary to make first-aid at all times available, and to maintain order.

"The first task faced by the army is the evacuating of all seaport cities on both coasts. Tides will grow constantly higher in the next month. All people living in the coast states will be moved inland to giant concentration camps.

"The volume of detail involved in this mass movement is too great to mention here, and my time is needed in the forming of still other plans. Hourly bulletins will be released from Washington, and any new developments will be announced on these.

"I regret that I can't—" President Kingston's voice broke, and for a full moment there was only the faint sound of static. Then, "I regret that there is no word of encouragement that I can add. We, as a race, are doomed, as are all the other peoples of this world. If we can't live—" Kingston's shoulders came up, his eyes shone—"then we can at least die like Americans!"

The silence that gripped the room was like a pressure calling for release. Somewhere near the wall a man said, "God!" And then the slim, dark man in the uniform of a flyer laughed. Harsh laughter, that rang loud in the hot quiet.

O'Day said: "That damn Borsi, somebody ought to wring his neck!"

Strident voices welled up from a dozen places in the room. "Shut up! Stop that, you!"

Borsi was on his feet. "'All life upon the face of the earth!' That's good, and those guys are supposed to be smart!"

"Quiet! Quiet!"

The roaring voice of the screen brought every head swinging to face the sound, and the new image that looked out at them.

Hill started up, but O'Day's big hand

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caught his shoulder, jammed him back in his seat. "Don't be a fool!"

Hill's eyes never left that hated face upon the screen. White hair, pointed chin; and the wide, straight-lipped mouth. Alpha De Spain!

Utter quiet then, as though a mighty hand had choked off all sound at its source.

"This is the time for statements," De Spain said quietly. "So I, too, will make one. You, the four thousand people within the Ark, are the only living beings upon this earth who will not die in the next four months. You should appreciate this fact, and most of you do. However, it also seems reasonable that some few of you have changed your ideas since you arrived here. I wish those few would speak—now!"

Steven Hill had only started to move when O'Day's weight pinned him to his seat. "It's a trap!" the big man whispered. "Watch yourself!"

"I do! I object!" The speaker was a tall, blond sound engineer on the far side of the room. "You can't make yourself a god! You can't murder millions of people!"

Waves of thunderous sound burst in the room. Fifty, a hundred pairs of hands reached for the tall man. Other voices broke out. "He's right! De Spain can't play God!"

Answering cries: "Throw them out! Put them outside, and let them die with the rest!"

A solid wedge of bright green uniforms split the churning crowd as a squad of armed guards poured into the room. The wicked black glitter of a Delta gun showed in the hands of the leader. They split, with machinelike precision, half of them plowing through to the knot of men who had the tall engineer back against the wall. The others sifted through the crowd. One minute. Two. The guards were moving back toward the door. A dozen or more prisoners went with them.

Hill's eyes came back to the screen. De Spain hadn't moved. His pointed chin still touched the silken scarf knotted around his throat, and the same half-smile still curved his lips. Complete quiet had returned before he spoke.

"I am glad to find that there are still men who are able to form opinions for themselves. I am looking forward to talking to each of them." Drooping lids veiled the green fire in his eyes. "Return to your quarters at once. All further orders will be sent out by the usual methods."

CHAPTER IX

TWO AGAINST DE SPAIN

STEVEN HILL waited only until he and O'Day were in their quarters before he asked:

"What will De Spain do with those men, Brian? How did he know there would be protests?"

"I don't know what he'll do with them." O'Day sat on a chair arm. "I'd hate to be in their shoes. Jan Kurtz started it in our recreation hall, poor guy."

"You mean. . . ."

O'Day shrugged. "I don't know. De Spain works that way. Remember, this is only one of the barracks. There are seven others. Three more for men, and the rest for women. De Spain must have had a squad of guards waiting outside the door on each level. He's smart, that guy, plenty smart."

"Kurtz didn't say it that way. He said De Spain thought he was God. Look what happened to Kurtz."

O'Day said, "Kurtz was hysterical. He was just shouting." He shrugged out of his jacket. "Better get some sleep, Steve, you'll have plenty to do tomorrow."

"That wasn't hysteria," Hill said slowly, "it was just damn clear thinking!" He turned away, began to undress.

A quizzical light came into O'Day's eyes, but he didn't speak.

After the light was out Hill lay staring, open-eyed, into the darkness. Like pictures on a screen, he saw again the events of the past week. Terry's death, Jay and Penny's wedding, and the cold smooth mask of De Spain's face.

The darkness became alive, peopled with wasted shapes. Heat victims whose shadow-thin bodies and sunken cheeks were too real. Whispering murmurs that might have been faint cries of: "Water—please, for the love of God—water!" Next week! Next month! The shadow of things to come!

"Steve!"

Hill's raw nerves jerked at the sound. He made his voice low. "Yes?"

O'Day's cigarette lighter snapped into flame. "I wondered if you were awake. Listen, Steve, what did you mean about that clear thinking business?"

"De Spain calls this the Ark," Hill said in a thin, dry voice. "That comes from

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the Bible. He's got pairs of everything, the same as Noah had. Then there's the Twelve—remember the twelve Apostles? —with De Spain as the final authority. That parallel is no accident."

"Wait a minute!" O'Day whispered. "It doesn't stop there. It goes further. I've forgotten—it's been too many years—but isn't there a phrase in the Bible somewhere that says the world will be destroyed by fire?"

Hill said: "Yes, there is."

"Then he *does* think he's God! He's fixed it so it comes out that way. The Twelve. . . . The Ark. . . . The Fire!" For a long time there was only the sound of O'Day's heavy breathing.

"You see now," Hill said softly, "why he has to die. History is studded with the names of egotists who have tried to play God. Each of them was killed. They had to be killed before they destroyed everything around them."

O'Day sat up. "What kind of a plan did you have?"

"I didn't have all the details worked out." Quick hope tightened Hill's throat. With O'Day's help it might be possible. "I've found a place where I can cut into the speaker line. Then I'll use a voice distorter in front of the microphone, and that way no one will ever know it isn't the regular announcer speaking."

"Will they hear that announcement on 'A' Level?"

"No, I can take care of that, too. But I haven't found the elevator motors yet, and I haven't got a gun."

O'Day said, "You couldn't swing it alone. You'd have to have someone on the elevator cut-in to bring the elevator to 'B' Level when you needed it."

"Right."

Silence again—a heavy oppressive silence. Once in the next five minutes O'Day spoke. Low, murmurous words that sounded like, "*And fire destroys. . . .*"

More waiting. Sweat crawled on Hill's flesh. The radiant second hand made three trips around the dial of the wall clock.

"You know De Spain's got detector eyes up there, and rays we've never heard of. It'd be easier to get into the U. S. Mint with a cold chisel. You know what will happen if you miss!"

Hill said, "A man can only die."

"I think I can get the gun. The guards in the armory have seen me around so much they don't pay much attention any more."

"Fine."

"But listen, Steve, I won't come in at all, unless I come in for half. I'll match coins with you, or play Sho-jet for high man. The winner rides the elevator up to De Spain's level!"

"Sorry, but the answer to that is no! I'm the guy who figured this out, and I can work it alone—except for the gun. If you went up and missed they'd still hook me. They'd get me when they started to check back. If I go it will leave you in the clear. Then, if I miss, you will get another chance. See?"

"But . . ."

"That's it." Hill said. "I'll fix a turntable, and a recording of the order. I'll use a time clock so that neither of us has to be near it. There's still the elevator and the gun."

"You've got Irish luck," O'Day said thinly. "Maybe you can get away with it. I'll show you where the motors for the elevator are, and I'll get you the gun tomorrow. And if you miss, I won't. I'll get a handful of grenades and—hell, that won't work either. He's got Omicron metal a foot thick around his quarters."

Hill said, "Thanks, Brian, I knew you were white."

Their hands met in the darkness, clung in a crushing grip.

"Maybe," O'Day whispered, "I can remember how to pray."

STEVEN HILL made the cut in the speaker line the next afternoon. Made it in minutes snatched from a job he was supervising on the level below. Once, he turned to find an armed guard watching him. His breath froze in his throat then, but he managed a casual, "Hello." The guard didn't give him a second glance.

The small transcription turn table, Hill made from parts stolen from the sound lab; and the record which carried the order was made the same way.

Hill ran a pick-up wire from the speaker line to a small closet where he had set up the turn table. The record was already in place. He had but to pick the day, and set the clock. Then the speakers would roar: "Steven Hill to 'A' Level, at ten-twelve!"

The elevator controls presented more difficulty. A hundred times Hill took his life in his two hands as he leaned out into the shaft. Any wrong move brought death. High voltage wires on each side of him; the danger of the elevator drop-

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ping, bulletlike, with him, at any second.

Even a guard could wreck the plan by merely finding Hill near the shaft. They all knew now that his job was sound—not juice!

The third night Hill and O'Day made the final plans.

"I've reported sick," the Irishman said. "That leaves me in the clear to handle the elevator controls. The gun's in my closet. I checked the clip, and it's ready. Anything else?"

"No. The order will come over at ten-fourteen. You open the switch at ten-eighteen, and close it when the light shows red. Then get plenty far away."

"Good luck, Steve." O'Day's voice was husky. "I'll clean up what you miss but —but hell, you ain't goin' to miss."

"It's on the lap of the gods."

It was. Hill knew it better than anyone else possibly could. Fifty things could go wrong. If they were using the speakers when his message came on! If the small elevator was in use when O'Day opened the switch! If . . . Hill stared into the darkness, and his own words echoed hollowly through his mind. *"A man can only die."*

The nervous tension was even greater in the morning, and it grew through each successive hour. At ten o'clock the hourly bulletin from Washington came on; at ten-o-six three orders from 'A' Level.

Minutes then! Mounting tension gripped Hill's throat, and the sweat ran cold on his back. One minute left! Thirty seconds . . . fifteen seconds . . . zero!

The booming voice of the speakers: "Steven Hill to 'A' Level at ten-eighteen. Steven Hill to 'A' Level at ten-eighteen."

Hill turned to the man beside him. He heard his own harsh voice say, "Here's the test set. I guess that's all for me."

Ten-sixteen! Hill turned from the closet, tucked the fat-barreled Delta gun in his waistband. Three or four minutes now, and it would be all over. Either he or De Spain would be dead! He, or De Spain. . . . The second hand crawled up the clock face. Ten-seventeen! Hill opened the door.

Down the gleaming corridor, his heels thudding into the matting. The tension had vanished now, and an odd coolness held him, as though he was an observer watching someone else stake his life on a whim of chance.

He had nearly reached the elevator when the tall man stepped out of the side corridor, came toward him. Jan Kurtz! Hill had one glimpse of the tall man's pallid face, one glimpse of wide, glazed eyes. No, not eyes, for the whole pupil was a strange dull red.

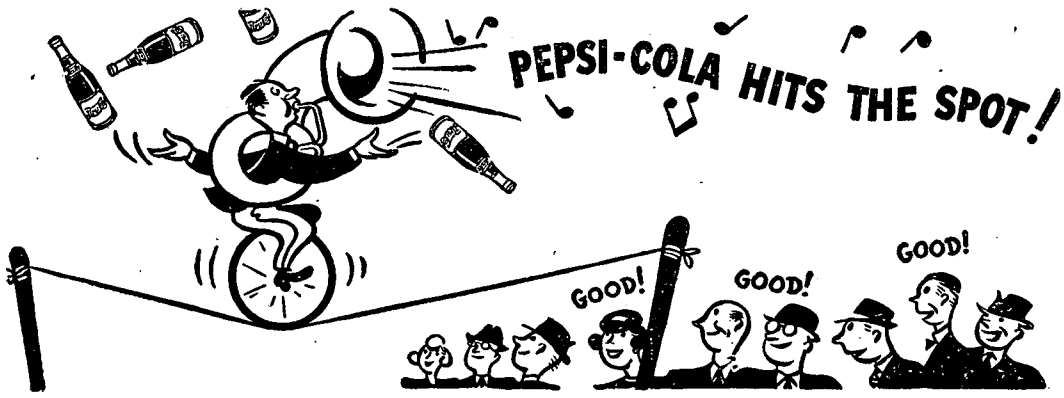
Hill wondered about it, briefly. Why hadn't Kurtz spoken? What had De Spain done to him for his shouted protest? A grim smile bent Hill's lips. At least Kurtz was still alive!

Ten-eighteen! The elevator doors yawned wide. Seconds now! He had the gun in his hand before the clang of the closing doors died away. There was the jolting shock as the elevator rocketed up. A snap, and then Hill was looking down the blue-walled corridor.

Now! A dozen steps down that hall, a turn to the right, and he would be in De Spain's quarters. Would be holding the trigger flat, while the gun bucked and spat in his hand.

Hill moved, listening tensely for the first sound. Somewhere in this hall the detector eyes would rake over him, and find the Delta gun. Switches, behind the wall, would click silently into place and start the alarms. Then it depended on speed alone!

He was just short of the archway when



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he heard the muted peal of a bell somewhere ahead of him.

Hill ran, a bleak curse springing to his lips. Lashing strides carried him up the short flight of stairs, and headlong into De Spain's quarters.

DE SPAIN was alone in the room. It was as though he hadn't moved since Hill had last seen him here. He was leaning forward in his chair, his elbows propped on the smooth wood. The cold mask of his face held no expression.

"You wished to see me?" De Spain's voice was almost casual.

There was an unworried sureness about De Spain that started doubt ticking through Hill's mind as he swung the Delta gun up. Doubt that vanished as he jerked the trigger flat, a pale flame spouted from the gun snout.

A frantic heartbeat while hope burned white-hot deep inside Hill. A heartbeat, while half the fifty-shot clip spewed out through the barrel—and nothing happened!

De Spain hadn't moved. His smooth pale face was still expressionless, but his whole image had become vague, like an image fading from a news screen. Hill was moving before he realized what had happened.

There was a wall between them. A transparent wall which had neatly blocked the room, and which was invisible until the Delta slugs had scarred its surface.

Two steps, and De Spain's voice rang loud in Hill's ears. "So you would kill the man who gave you a chance to live?"

Hill was against the wall now, his hand flat on its glass-smooth surface. Maybe if he pushed the gun snout hard against the wall a few of the bullets might get through. Maybe. . . .

His head was roaring then, and De Spain's image swelled and shrank. White fog seemed to be rolling up from the floor. The gun hung straight down at Hill's side and its weight was too great for him to raise. He swayed there, swearing helplessly, while the floor tilted and then leaped up to meet him.

The roaring was still in his brain when he struggled back to a pain-filled consciousness. He saw De Spain first, still seated at the table, flanked on each side by two big guards. He tried to smile then, at another face dimly visible in the background. Penny . . . no, Theta De Spain!

Something stung his nostrils. Things were suddenly very clear in the room. The pain in his shoulders was real, was caused by the biting fingers of the two men who held him erect.

"I am sorry, Mr. Hill," De Spain purred, "that our hospitality isn't what it might be. But we are equipped to take care of visitors of every kind. We knew you were coming yesterday when you cut into the elevator controls. The rest was simple."

Hill squared his shoulders. "To hell with that!" he said bitterly. "I tried to kill you, and failed. Maybe the next man will fail, too, but there'll be another man following him. Always, you can look forward to that. They'll never stop trying until you are dead!"

De Spain leaned forward. His words were barely audible. "Take this swine out and shoot him!"

"Come on, you." A guard jerked at Hill's shoulders, spun him around. "You an' me've got an appointment."

Hill twisted his face back; hatred lined his taut speech. "You mad fool! Correct the damage you've done while you're still alive to do it! You'll never live to start your new world!"

For the first time De Spain's expression changed. A thin smile curved his wide mouth. "Wait a minute. This young man seems to have courage, and that foolish quality is always entertaining. I don't think I'll have him shot—just yet." He leaned back in his chair, nodded slowly. "No, Hill, I have something else in mind for you. Something a great deal more interesting."

Hill spun then, and dived away from the guard. His shirt and jacket ripped from shoulder to waist, and he was free. He rolled to his feet, took one step, and launched himself at De Spain's throat.

A heavy body slammed into him from the side. Something crashed down on his skull. Waves of light and pain burst back of his eyes, and then there was only blackness.

CHAPTER X

THE ROBOT MEN

THERE was no roaring in Steven Hill's head now, only a dull ache that throbbed at the base of his brain. He was conscious, and had been for fifteen minutes, but only once in that time had he opened his eyes.

He had seen the ceiling, and De Spain's

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hawk profile outlined sharply against it, like a trick camera shot. The emotionless mask had fallen away from De Spain's face. His mouth was tight and angry, and hot color burned in his cheeks as he spoke into a microphone.

"Anna Overbeck to my quarters at once!"

Anna Overbeck. Hill wondered wearily who she was and what hellish science she commanded. Overbeck. The name stirred familiar echoes in the dark recesses of his mind. He knew then. Anna Overbeck, a frail and tiny black-gowned woman who, ten years before, had announced a cure for cancer.

Her name had been headline news then, and she had been a seven days' wonder because she'd allow no newscasters in her laboratory. Because she would make no statement to the press. Twice winner of the Nobel prize for medicine, her life was dedicated to the treatment of incurable disease. A score of splendid achievements were listed after her name.

What, in the name of God, was she doing here?

Hands were lifting Hill, then. He let his head roll limply and saw, through slitted eyes, a wheeled stretcher. There were low voices in the background, but he couldn't distinguish the words. The stretcher began to move. He forced himself to remain relaxed, to move loosely as the stretcher bumped down the low flight of stairs.

There was still a chance, still a faint, small hope. He could roll off the stretcher, and be on top of the guard before he had any warning. He would have at least a fighting chance then. Man against man with the guard's holstered gun as the prize—and death to the loser!

But even as his leg muscles tightened he knew that plan would never work. The guards on "A" Level weren't armed. They couldn't be, or the detector eyes would sound the alarms every time they walked the length of the hall.

Without a gun he hadn't a chance. An alarm would bring five or ten other guards. He had to wait. Wait while cold sweat bathed his body, while his nerves stretched tight and raw. Once the guards left he could at least overpower the old woman, and then. . . .

The soft tires of the stretcher whispered down the corridor, and through an open door. A deep voice said, "We c'n stand by, here, if you want any help."

There was no spoken word. Brutal hands suddenly caught his wrists, yanked them up over his head. His arms were pulled full length, bent cruelly down over the metal rail of the stretcher. Other hands caught his ankles. A single breath, and he was powerless.

"A'right," the heavy voice panted, "he ain't movin' now!"

Hill caught a glimpse of a black-clad arm, of a rubber-gloved hand, of a shining hypodermic syringe!

Desperately, he heaved upward, twisted in the iron grasp of the guards. God alone knew what hell broth that syringe contained!

A flat voice said, "Now!"

There was a sharp small pain of the needle thrust. Then, in scant seconds, a numbness flowed over his body like water. An odd numbness, unlike anything he had ever known. A tingling cold held his arms and legs for a few seconds, and was gone. And in its place—*nothing!*

He couldn't feel the grip that had burned his wrists, nor the vicious pressure of the rail against his arms. Good God! What had they done?

His chest and thighs were tingling with the strange cold. He was moving. He knew that because his head flopped to one side, and he could see the wheeled stretcher that had brought him here. All feeling had gone, as though the body on the table was no longer his.

Panic flamed in his brain and he tried, desperately, to move even a finger—and failed.

His eyes were unhurt. Yes. He could see the guard's bulky figure move past him to the door. He could hear, too, for the rumble of the guard's voice was plain.

"I'd sure hate to have them use that stuff on me."

The gloved hands were close to his face. Deftly, his head was turned so that his cheek lay flat against the table. He could see a full half of the room now. Gleaming surgical instruments lay in a row on a sterile pad on the table beside his. Then the black-clad woman moved into view.

She was tiny and stooped. Her iron-gray hair was caught tightly back from her face, bunched in a small knot. The years and pain and fatigue had stamped deep lines upon her face, whipped the skin tight across her cheekbones. Her eyes—merciful Heaven! They weren't eyes at all, but wounds.

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No, that was wrong. The irises were the dull red of fresh blood, instead of white, and that gave the weird effect. The pupils were only pin points of black against the crimson.

"Anna! I—I was afraid you . . ."

The husky, remembered voice flicked across Hill's mind like a flash. Theta De Spain!

THE old woman's face turned. Her voice was low, unhurried. "You are late, Theta."

"Yes, Anna, yes. I am late, but there's still time. You can't do this to—to him!"

"But your father ordered it thus, my child."

"I know, but you . . ." Theta De Spain was standing near the table. Hill could see her frantic eyes, her trembling, vivid lips. "If you make the injection into his brain it—it will last for several years. He will be a robot, able only to carry out orders. He—he will be a machine, not a human! You can't. . . ."

Anna Overbeck was speaking again: "You were to help me, child. You will find a surgical gown over there in the drawer."

Theta's fingers gripped the table edge. "How long will this treatment last?"

"A year or two, possibly more. Sometimes as many as five."

"No!" Theta's lips were almost blue. There was a pinched-in look about her nostrils, and a faint pallor showed through her tan. "You can't. I won't help you."

"What"—each word was low and distinct—"would your father say about that?"

"He'll never know," Theta said swiftly. "You can't tell him without giving yourself away. I've—I've known for weeks that the treatment didn't work on you. I saw you using some kind of fluid on your eyes this morning. You wouldn't have to do that if it had worked. You wouldn't have done anything but obey orders. You'd—you'd have been a robot!"

The old woman's shoulders drooped. "You saw that?"

"Yes, I did. And you could give him the same fluid."

The horrible blood-red eyes flicked down over Hill and back to the girl. "And what is this man to you?"

A single low word, breathed tautly: "Nothing!"

"No?" A dry-as-dust chuckle whispered through the room. "Erich Bischoff should hear you say that so. He should see the color come and go in your cheeks, child. You would have trouble convincing him that this one meant nothing to you. Maybe I should call him now, and tell him."

Theta De Spain's eyes were sooty shadows against the rice-paper pallor of her skin. "You wouldn't! You wouldn't do that to me!"

The old woman leaned forward. "And why not? You are dangerous now. This is war, child, and you are an enemy. Your father thinks I am a robot, a creature without a will. A creature who dumbly obeys all orders. I would have him go on thinking that. So, we play a game, you and I. Like chess. You have good pieces, and so have I. Suppose we end it this way? I do what you ask, and you keep my secret. Checkmate—no?"

"Of course, Anna, of course. I hadn't told father, had I? And I've known for a long time about you."

"I had to be sure, child. You are very young. Tomorrow you might change your mind, and run with your pretty tale to your father. The next time he would be sure."

"But, Anna. . . ."

"I will do what you ask." The old woman turned quickly. "The gowns, child, hurry."

Theta De Spain moved across the room.

Hill tried again to move, and again failed utterly. What kind of an injection were they talking about? And why was Theta De Spain taking his part? He remembered then how he had waited for her to report his outburst to her father; how he had waited for the guards to take him to "A" Level. And how they had never come!

Both women were beside the table, garbed in crisp white gowns. Hot lights suddenly blazed down, and the old woman leaned forward.

"A scalpel," she said.

Immediately the shining instrument passed from one gloved hand to the other. Anna Overbeck bent over Hill, and made quick movements near his temple. There was no pain, and his straining eyes could see nothing. Then the old woman turned to drop the scalpel into a tray. Its bright blade was stained with blood.

Hill lost all track of time. It seemed that he lay there for hours under the burning lights. Hours, while there was

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Criminals, escaped convicts, riff-raff, driven back a thousand years by the approach of unescapable death. Slinking, heavily armed, roving by night, to prey upon each other

only the click of the instruments, and an occasional low-voiced command.

Then the old woman was stepping back, stripping off her gloves. "There. Even your father could not be sure his order had not been carried out, unless you told him."

Theta was still pale. "I won't, Anna, if . . ."

"He will return to consciousness in a moment. Would you stay and accept his thanks?"

"No!" Theta De Spain slipped out of the white gown. "No, and don't tell him even that I was here." A second, and she was gone.

ANNA OVERBECK came back to the table with a small vial and an eye-dropper. She bent close. Liquic splashed and stung in Hill's eyes. For just a moment the room vanished behind a curtain of red.

She was pulling a cone down from the ceiling, fitting it over his face. There was the hiss of escaping gas. Hill choked, his nostrils burned. The electric tingling was in his chest and thighs again, then spreading outward through his arms and legs. The tingling stopped, and the old woman said:

"You can move now."

He could! He pulled his arms down, stared at his moving fingers. How good it seemed!

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"You heard the talk here." It was a flat statement. "You are wondering."

Hill nodded.

"I was to submit you to a treatment. The same treatment to which four others from your Level were submitted. Jan Kurtz was one. You know him?"

"Yes, I did. and I wondered what had happened to him."

"This is a discovery of mine. Long ago I found that one portion of the brain controlled man's will, his thought. With that portion deadened he ceases to be man and becomes just a robot. A machine, not a human, which will take orders from anyone who commands. That is what De Spain had planned for you."

Hill said: "But she said he'd done that to you. Why would he do that?"

"An old legend, perhaps. The monster destroys its creator. Only in this case it wasn't quite like that." Her hand trembled. "Listen closely, for there isn't much time. You are supposed to be a robot. You must obey these instructions perfectly or both you and I will be punished."

"I will," Hill said. "You can depend on that. I will until I get a chance to—"

"Listen! First: You never speak unless someone asks you a direct question, preceded by your name. You never question an order, nor do you answer when you receive one. You obey, immediately, and you never stop work unless ordered to stop.

"You have to be ordered to eat, ordered to sleep. You continue to obey one command until you receive the next. But always, each command must be preceded by your name. Remember that, for you will be tested many times in the next few days. They will want to be sure that the injection had full effect."

"How about my eyes?" Hill asked.

"You will have to use this fluid. I'll give you a bottle of it, and an eye-dropper. Never leave it behind you, never get far away from it. You *must* put a drop in each eye every three hours. It has to be that way, for if I made it stronger it would burn the tissue of the eye. Anyone can tell, at a glance, which people have been robotized. Everything depends on this red fluid. *Never forget it!*"

"I won't."

Anna Overbeck nodded, and then pressed the palms of her hands tight against her temples. "More depends upon you than you know."

Hill listened intently. The old woman talked for ten minutes in a low, crisp voice. She gave him detailed instructions. She told him how to eat, how to speak, how to sleep—everything. And then she ended with:

"That red fluid is your life blood, never forget it!"

Hill swung his legs off the table. "I won't. Thanks again for giving me another chance to wreck De Spain."

"I, too, needed another chance." A wan smile pulled at her lips. "For I, too, have work to do, much more work than I can ever finish."

"Why did he robotize you?"

"We disagreed, he and I. Murder is a thing I have never liked." Her hands made a gesture of defeat. "The treatment had been used only on animals until he used it on me. He was afraid he might kill me if he used too much, and it wore off. He is a devil!"

"Right!"

"You may go now." She watched him turn silently toward the door, and then said, "So? You forget already. You move without an order."

Hill stopped, arms limp at his sides, face stiff.

"Good." The old woman's voice was suddenly harsh. "Hill, return to your quarters on 'B' Level at once."

Hill swung without speaking, and went through the door.

THE speaker horns were blaring the hourly bulletin from Washington when the elevator stopped on "B" Level.

"President Kingston announced this afternoon that plans have been completed for the immediate exploration of the Arctic region in the hope that suitable lands might be found there for a group of Americans. All hope of a future civilization, and of the recording of the accomplishments of this civilization rest with these expeditions.

"The movement of the United States Capital to Denver, Colorado, was started this afternoon. A hundred and fifty army bombing planes will transport the most valuable and necessary of the governmental documents to Denver. Rising tides and forecasted tidal waves make it necessary to abandon the Capital. Three days will be allowed for the removal of all people living in the Capital, and after that only an honor guard of Marines will remain in the city.

"A round dozen naval vessels were sunk

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this morning when a tidal wave struck the naval base in San Pedro harbor. The loss of life can only be estimated, but . . ."

Hill moved down the corridor, his eyes held rigidly ahead, his face set in a stiff mask. He couldn't pause to listen, nor show any interest in the message. He had to play a robot's part, and two lives —his and Anna's—depended upon his acting.

He passed the news screens, the lounge, the dining room. Two men spoke to him without using his name, and both times Hill stalked past them without turning his head.

Brian O'Day was bending over the table when Hill entered their quarters. He whirled, took two long steps, and put his hands on Hill's shoulders.

"I thought you—you weren't coming back." A white line appeared suddenly around his mouth, as though cut there by a lash. "Your eyes! They made a robot out of you!"

Hill said: "Steady, man, it's not quite that bad." In terse sentences he told O'Day everything that had happened.

"Then—"

"You'll have to order me around or I won't be able to go out of this room. And don't let me forget the eye fluid."

"I won't, Steve."

That evening Hill ate at O'Day's command. He didn't speak throughout the meal, nor did the Irishman. They had finished, and O'Day had said, "Hill, smoke a cigarette," when Borsi stopped at their table.

"Ain't this nice?" A grin twisted Borsi's puffed lips. "Little Rollo looks brighter tonight than usual. Maybe he can do tricks for us."

Hill fought down the rising flood of anger, stared steadily at his cigarette end.

"Beat it, Borsi," O'Day said harshly. "Beat it while you're still in one piece."

"Just one trick," the swart man's voice was loud. "Hill, get me a glass of water."

Hill got to his feet, crossed the room. O'Day's angry voice rose behind him, but he couldn't turn to look. He got the water, started back.

"See?" Borsi grinned. "He does know tricks."

Hill halted in front of the swart man.

O'Day's eyes shone. "Hill," he barked, "throw it in his face."

Hill obeyed, instantly. Borsi was going back, ducking, when the water caught him full in the face. He swore, pawed at his eyes, and then lunged forward, fists swinging.

Hill froze; he couldn't defend himself without an order. Then O'Day's big body was between them, his hand leaping out to catch Borsi's throat.

"Borsi," there was an icy chill to the words, "you asked for that, and you got it. Stay away from us, stay plenty far away. The next time you make a wrong move I'll kill you, just the way I'd kill any rat!"

A curse spilled from Borsi's gray lips. O'Day pushed him, and then as he staggered, off-balance, the Irishman's hand smashed across Borsi's mouth. The swart man stumbled against a table, took that to the floor with him.

O'Day turned and said, "Hill, return to your quarters."

CHAPTER XI

THE WHITE DEATH

THE Universal Newscasting plane was two and a half hours out of New York when the fever hit Mike James. He was delirious before Forbes could get him into his bunk.

"Ice water," he muttered, "gallons of it. A whole river of ice water." James struck clumsily at Forbes as he strapped him in the bunk, and then began whispering about a ski tournament he'd covered the year before.

Forbes said: "Sure, pal, sure. We'll get the Lake Placid job this winter. The chief promised it to us."

"Ice water—I'm burnin' up!"

Forbes dampened a towel and placed it across James' forehead. He stood there for a moment, fumbling for a cigarette, and then went to the control board and called New York.

The board speaker said: "Pick it up!"

"Forbes on Crew Two, Chief. Two and half hours out of New York for Anaconda. Mike James just folded like he'd been hit with an ax. The heat I guess, but he should be under a doctor's care."

"You will continue to Anaconda," the speaker directed. "Every available doctor in New York is swamped with three times as much work as he can possibly handle. How did James act?"

"He went down in a pile without any warning. He was raving when I picked him up. He's running a high temperature now."

"I was afraid. . . . Listen, Forbes, that

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isn't heat prostration, it's *Muerto Blanco.* White Death!"

"White Death?"

"Two weeks ago the first case was reported in Panama. Yesterday thirty-five thousand people died of it on the Atlantic coast. Washington clamped down on the publicity, they didn't know what to do for it, and they were trying to block off the infected areas. That didn't work—it's in New York now!"

"What"—Forbes was sweating—"what can I do for him?"

"*You* can't do anything for him but pray. One of the research scientists found a serum that works in about two cases out of three, if it's given in time! De Spain's doctors will know what it is. Get him there as fast as you can! He hasn't a ghost of a chance without the serum, and neither have you. Be sure and get an injection for yourself."

"What about the crew?" Forbes asked. "Tony went to the hospital in Washington. Now James is sick. That leaves just Grey and I."

"There aren't any replacement men. Do the best you can, and take care of yourself. But get a statement from De Spain!"

The red light on the control board winked out. Forbes thumbed the microphone switch off, and sat there for a long time staring at the instrument dials in front of him.

Penny was—well, she was as safe as anyone could be. She was quartered in a basement, far below De Spain University. Safe enough for the present, but in another two weeks. . . . But where would the rest of them be in two weeks?

Paul Grey appeared in the door of the pilot's compartment. "How about clearance on De Spain's field?" he asked. "We'll be on top of them in a minute."

"I'll call them, Paul."

"What's wrong with James?"

Forbes told him. Grey said, "White Death, huh?" He stood there, a lean, bitter-mouthed man in wrinkled flying clothes. An unlighted cigarette bobbed at the corner of his mouth as he spoke. "Hell, maybe it's better. He beats the rest of us out of this by two weeks or a month." He shrugged stoically and turned away.

Forbes was using the microphone again. "Calling De Spain Field. Calling De Spain Field."

"Dispatcher De Spain Field speaking. Go ahead."

"Universal Newscasting ship coming in. We'd like to have a statement from De Spain, and we've got a man aboard who needs medical attention badly."

"What's the matter with him?"

"White—White Death!"

"Wait a minute!" There was a long pause. Forbes switched the floor panel back, and looked down at the concrete fan of the runway as the big ship spiraled in for a landing.

"Hello, Universal. You are refused landing clearance. Do not land on this field. Do not land on this field. Do not—" The voice choked off abruptly.

There was a slight jar as the plane wheels touched the runway, and then the big ship was taxiing toward the huge doors set in the face of the hill.

"Universal! Leave this field at once or your plane will be destroyed!"

Forbes' brows pulled down. He slipped out of his seat, raced for the pilot's compartment. "Paul! The dispatcher orders us off the field. He says the ship will be destroyed if. . . ."

"Yeah." The ship had braked to a stop, and Grey was leaning on the wheel, staring at the huge doors. "That guy wasn't fooling. Look!"

Forbes' eyes followed Grey's pointing finger. He saw the panels between the doors slide back; saw the blue-black snouts of the anti-aircraft guns moving out.

Grey's hand was already on the throttle. The plane slewed in a half-circle, motors roaring, and thundered back down the runway.

Forbes clung to the back of Grey's seat. "Where to?"

"There's a field in Butte." Grey yanked the ship savagely into the air. "James still needs a doc, doesn't he?"

THE DOCTOR said, "Steady now!" He waited until Forbes' breath went out of his lungs, and then slipped the hypodermic needle deep in his shoulder. A moment later he withdrew the needle, taped a small bandage there.

"That'll swell a little," he said. "Your arm will be sore for a day or two. Sorry I couldn't do anything for your friend."

Forbes said, "Thanks anyway, Doc."

The doctor snapped his bag shut, straightened. He was a thin, unshaven old man who swayed as he moved toward the plane door. "Maybe I can get some sleep now. I haven't seen a bed for a week."

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A strained bleak silence came into the plane after the doctor had gone. Gray lighted a cigarette and let it dangle, forgotten, between his lips. Forbes touched the bandage on his shoulder.

"Fifteen minutes," he whispered. "If James'd got an injection fifteen minutes earlier he'd have had a chance." His eyes crawled to the still figure on the bunk. "Damn De Spain!"

"What now?" Grey's head drooped between hunched shoulders. His face looked a hundred years old. "The interview with De Spain is shot. You heard what the doc said about the louse. For two years he's been fixin' his hide-out. He's got enough supplies to last for four years."

"Wait!" Forbes' face was grim. "Why don't we use what the doc told us? You put this crate over his place, and I'll pick it up with the wing 'scopes. When I get through telling the customers, De Spain will know he's been for a ride."

"Yeah, why not? Today is a good day to die." The words came out at the tail of Grey's breath. "That hill is lousy with guns, and he's probably got guys who know how to use 'em."

"Look! You take the ship way up in the sun. Then dive right at the runway, and just clear the crest of the hill. I'll have time to speak my piece, and they can't get men up there quick enough to do us any harm."

"Why not?" Grey stood up, shrugged his stained shirt tight across his shoulders. "The customers pay good dough for this." His eyes were old, tired. "Brace yourself, guy, we aren't going to be there long."

Twenty year-long minutes while the big ship climbed.

Then the speaker from the pilot's compartment said:

"Three minutes, guy."

The second hand on Forbes' strap watch made two trips around the dial while Forbes worked the blinker switch. The brittle "Pick it up!" of the board speaker was still ringing in his ears when the ship nosed over, dived.

A second while Forbes' eyes swept over the board. Both wing 'scopes on. The floor panel uncovered. Right! His body was pushing hard against the seat straps when he began to spill harsh words into the microphone:

"Speaking from a Universal Newscasting ship, diving toward the headquarters of Alpha De Spain, the world's greatest scientific mind. Below the surface of the drab hill is an abandoned mine which De Spain has converted into comfortable living quarters for four thousand people. Food, clothing, and other supplies which will last four years have been stored here. . . ."

The runway fan seemed to expand, to grow. The white lines of the fences showed up plainly. Blood pounded in Forbes' temples. Any minute now hell would erupt from the hilltop. Any minute!

"Just an hour ago De Spain refused an interview to this announcer, and refused medical aid to a dying man on this ship. We were ordered off his field under threat of death, and we saw anti-aircraft guns ready to back that threat. In just a second we'll be pulling out of this dive, and flying straight toward the doors of De Spain's hangars. If you watch closely you can see. . . ."

Sudden, sickening pressure nailed Forbes in his seat, held him there. He gasped, fought dizzily for breath. Then the ship was hurtling straight toward the deepset hangar doors, toward the guns.

Forbes said, "Sorry, I—"

Up again, motors wide open, while the ground was a gray blur under the wings. Forbes pulled the microphone close.

"I am sorry we are unable to give you a better picture of the last safe refuge of man on the face of the earth." The clipped, bitter words seemed to burn his lips. "The last safe stronghold, ladies and gentlemen, on the face of the earth. Life goes on there, untroubled, while the rest of the world dies! This, the cradle of the new world. For from here will come a new civilization after the rest of us have returned to dust. . . ."

The ship bounced, slid off on one wing. The gray earth whirled in a vicious circle. The pilot's speaker said, "From here out it gets bad. Take a look at what's coming."

FORBES' glance went back to the floor panel. The runway was alive now. Blood-red wings flashed in the sun as tiny planes flicked across the runway—like hornets leaving a nest—and streaked upward.

The plane rocked again, as Forbes began to speak. "Below us, a squadron of De Spain's red ships is leaving the hangar with the intention of wiping out this unit of Universal Newscasting. Look closely at the screen if you doubt me; you will see puffs of white from the top of the hill. Those puffs of white are from

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the muzzles of the anti-aircraft guns. Only our extreme speed, and low altitude protects us. Sorry that your glimpse was so brief. But now, if our luck holds, we are going away from here."

Forbes looked back and down. One, two, three, four, five of the trim red ships climbing in tight formation. Climbing toward an unarmed ship.

Taut minutes stretched thin. Forbes talked. His throat went dry. Sweat dropped from his forehead to the black surface of the control-board. Once he shot a quick glance at the sheet-covered figure on the bunk, and then went on talking. Inwardly a mental voice whispered, "Not a week, not a month, but just a couple of hours."

The pilot's speaker rasped, "Luck, we got luck. There's a fleet of army bombers ahead of us. I'm sticking this crate right in the middle of them."

Forbes whirled the dial of the standard transmitter to the army wave-length, said, "Calling fleet of army bombers. Calling fleet of army bombers! Universal Newscasting ship to the north and west of you is being attacked by squadron of De Spain's pursuit ships. We are unarmed, and ask assistance."

"Calling Universal! Observers have spotted you. Coming at full speed!"

Forbes flicked the blinker switch, said, "End of broadcast."

"Nice!" It was the chief's thin and distant voice. "Nice, but you're a damned fool! That broadcast wrote death warrants for ten thousand men. They'll swarm down on De Spain's to try and crash in, and he'll kill them."

"It's true," Forbes insisted doggedly, "every damn word of it's true!"

"Right. The fault is mine. I should never had let it go over the air. Now I've got to stage a broadcast here and counteract all you said."

There were other planes around them now. Sleek, big-winged, olive-green army bombers. Their plane swung, directly under the formation, moved with them. The red ships were only specks against the horizon.

Forbes said: "Sorry I messed things up, Chief. I guess I went a little crazy when —when James died. I lost my head."

"James is dead?"

"Right, Chief."

"And he—he was one of the best. One of. . . ." The thin voice lagged to a stop. Then, words that were choked, barely audible. "Return to headquarters."

"Right, Chief."

HOURS later Jay Forbes was sitting in the cockpit with Grey when the faint glow of New York's lights tinted the dark horizon. The only sound was the throaty hum of the engines, and the hiss of the radio speaker.

Grey shifted in his seat. "Twenty minutes and we'll be in."

"At least we can get a drink and a bath."

"Yeah, but what about him?" Grey jerked a thumb at the cabin door.

"I've been thinking about that." Forbes said softly. "We don't want to take him into New York. He won't mean anything there—not with all the others who've died in the last week. Probably they'll—they'll bury him in the same grave with a hundred others. Mike rates a better break than that."

"Yeah." Grey nodded. "I'll take this crate out to sea, and Mike can get that water he wanted." He brushed at his mouth. "Hell of a way to talk, but Mike"—he turned his face away—"would know it wasn't a joke."

They swung wide of the New York lights, slanted down gradually, a hundred miles at sea. Grey set the automatic pilot, and followed Forbes back into the main cabin. Together they wrapped the stiffening body in a sheet, carried it to the door.

Forbes stopped. "We got to have a weight," he said, "a weight for his feet."

"Right." Grey pivoted on his heel, stalked back to the control board. A moment later he was back with an iscanascope in his hands. "This weighs fifty pounds. It's the right thing, too; maybe he can use a 'scope where. . . ."

Forbes swallowed, said, "Right."

Together they fought the door open against the slip stream. Grey held it, his shoulders braced against the panel while Forbes eased the sheet-wrapped body through the opening.

There was a flash of white, a blurring streak against the dark, and then nothing.

Forbes' eyes stung painfully as he turned away.

Grey said: "So long, Mike."

Noon was only five minutes away when Forbes and Grey went down the hallway and into the control room of Universal Newscasting. A page boy met them there.

"Mr. Beck will be here in about ten minutes. He asks that you wait."

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Forbes nodded, and the page left. Then Forbes and Grey moved—like steel to a magnet—toward the giant wall screens. Five of the sixteen screens were blank, a dull, lifeless gray. The others—

Forida: An air-view, picked up by the wing 'scopes of a speeding plane. Wreckage dotted, gray-green water. A flashing glimpse of an ocean liner beached a full mile from the pounding surf, like the carcass of some giant fish. Wheeling gulls, clustered over sprawling figures, tiny and white in the sun. The smashed and splintered fragments of what had been the elevated, cross-State highway.

Paris, France: A swarming crowd beneath a balcony. The swift nasal accents of Lemoine, the French premier, magnified a thousandfold by the speaker horns. The clipped comment of the Universal announcer. "The crowd is demanding that the water ration be increased. For weeks now, these people have been allowed only one gallon of water each day. Lemoine is assuring the crowd that everything possible is being done, and that it is fatal to drink any water except that issued from the Government depots."

The crowd sound deepened, grew. Raw-throated shouts blotted out the voice of the horns. Suddenly the mob split, swirled away from a single man who crouched, alone, on the pavement.

Glinting metal in the hands of the crouching man. Gun metal that spat a blue-white tongue of flame. Lemoine rose to full height, his hands going to his throat. Bright crimson spilled down over his white shirt front. He swayed, and then fell forward. The balcony rail caught him waist high, and he hung there like a discarded scarecrow.

Uniformed men swarmed out on the balcony. Men who carried stubby-barreled machine guns. The speaker horns magnified the muzzle blast of the guns, the rising scream of the crowd in an ever mounting wave of sound.

FORBES and Grey moved slowly toward the control desk. They went past the broadcast of a forest fire from the Pacific Northwest; a raging flood from the Mississippi valley. Then the boiling yellow clouds of a dust storm, and the wreckage-strewn wake of a cyclone.

Next they saw the airport in Washington, D. C., where a squadron of army bombers were lined up in front of a black-mouthed hangar.

The announcer's voice: "The evacuation of the National Capital has nearly been completed. This is the last squadron of planes to leave here, and they carry the last of the documents which will be salvaged. President Kingston is to ride one of these ships to Denver, Colorado, which has been picked as the new seat of government until the concentration camps are. . . ."

All sound within the huge room suddenly stopped.

Forbes and Grey wheeled around to face the desk. Forbes stared, unable to believe his eyes. It had been but two weeks since he'd seen Charles Beck, and yet. . . .

Beck was in a wheelchair. Deep-socketed, unwavering eyes watched them approach, and a thin, trembling hand crept to the bank of toggle switches. He was pale—an odd, blue pallor—and his lips were a bloodless line.

The two men stopped before the desk. Forbes said, "Crew Two reporting, sir."

Beck nodded. "I called you in so the boys could work your ship over." His voice alone was unchanged. "From now on you will operate without assignment or censorship from this desk. You will be allotted certain hours during which you will broadcast. An automatic relay station has been set up, a thousand miles inland, which will operate as long as there is life left upon this earth."

"Why?" Forbes asked tightly. "Why are you leaving this headquarters?"

"You have been away from New York," Beck said gently. "The food supply is already failing, and the water is contaminated. All paying industry here has ceased to function as such. There were twenty thousand victims of White Death reported yesterday. The transportation systems have already stopped their service. The mass of the people have no money for anything but food, and the sky-rocketing prices mean that even the necessities will soon be out of reach."

Forbes said: "God! I didn't know!"

"There have already been food and water riots on the east side, and it is only a matter of a week until the whole city will be in a state of siege. The power supply will probably fail next week when the tidal wave hits the lower end of the island." Beck brushed at his mouth, went on. "The subways have been the only refuge from the sun, and once the sea begins to reclaim this coast. . . ."

"How—how high will these tidal waves

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be? I mean how far inland will they reach?"

"No one can say, for sure. Smaller tidal waves have already wiped out all the coastal cities in the Hawaiian Islands. The remaining population has retreated inland to the mountains, but the intense heat will soon make that unbearable."

"Why don't you come with us, Chief?" Grey asked. "We'll pick up some food in the middle West, and hunt us a nice cool glacier. . . ."

"I know. A fool's hope at best, but this is my job. You can quit any time you wish. The heat will ruin most of the receiving sets soon, and people have so much pain now that they won't want to see more upon a news screen. Still, I am too old to quit now. I wouldn't know what else to do." He turned then. "Forbes, you were married just a few days ago, weren't you?"

"Yes, sir."

"Your wife is still at the University?"

"Yes."

"I'd suggest that you go directly there as soon as the overhaul job on your ship is finished. After that, everything is up to you. Even your fuel supply will be a serious problem. You'll have to beg or steal it. The ship will be insulated against heat—much more heat than the human body can stand. Your broadcast schedule will be waiting with your ship. You will keep in touch with this office as—as long as there is an office."

"Yes, sir, I—" Forbes stopped. Beck's blue-veined hand dropped in a gesture of dismissal.

THE cabin of the Universal Newscasting ship was bigger, fatter. A dull white paint had replaced the former blue. Even the undercarriage had been changed, and the landing wheels were new.

"Them wheels," a mechanic said, "is the real thing. No matter how hot it gets them tires ain't blowin'. They ain't got no air in 'em!"

Grey said: "Swell, pal, what else?"

"The water tanks is only half full. If I was you I'd head for some place where there is plenty of water."

Forbes opened the foot-thick door of the plane. "That," he said, "might be a good idea, only we're goin' to school."

"Huh?"

Grey crowded past Forbes into the pilot's compartment. The motors backfired, caught, and the propellers vanished in a silver sheen.

The ship was moving when Forbes shouted back. "Yes, we're goin' to De Spain University."

The door slapped shut. The big ship raced down the road, lifted smoothly into the air.

CHAPTER XII

THE WORLD IS DOOMED

"HILL, take that screen over to the elevator."

Steven Hill moved past the horse-faced sound engineer without speaking. He kept his face stiff as he got the five-foot news screen off the rack, and heaved it up on his shoulder. The sound engineer had turned back to his supply sheet before Hill went out the door.

Hill went slowly down the bright-walled corridor. He kept his eyes on the stooped figure of Kurtz, who was just ahead of him, and was careful to match his slow stride. For three days now he had played the part of a red-eyed robot. All three of those days he'd spent on the "A" Level assembly job.

No one—at least no one he knew—suspected that he wasn't the same dull-brained machine Kurtz was. No, they couldn't suspect him or he wouldn't be working on "A" Level.

"A" Level! Three days ago those words had stopped the breath in his throat. De Spain's headquarters! It had looked, at first, as though the fates were giving him another chance at De Spain.

They hadn't! The blue-walled hell was constantly patrolled by the big guards, and even the robots were under constant surveillance. Two guards met them at the elevator, and paced beside them to the meeting hall where the five newscasting screens were being fitted into the wall.

Not once in the three days had he seen De Spain.

The horse-faced engineer appeared as he and Kurtz reached the elevator, and ordered them inside. They moved toward the yawning doors, had nearly reached them when the three guards raced down the corridor to crowd past them.

"You guys c'n wait," the leader snapped. "This's important."

Hill didn't stop, nor did Kurtz. They moved slowly, dumbly forward. The guards cursed them, struck at Kurtz's arm.

One of the other guards said, "Wait a

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minute. These guys are dummies. Have the guy call 'em off."

"Hill! Kurtz! You two back up and wait." The sound engineer's yell reached them.

Hill's face was a mask, but behind blood-red eyes his nimble mind was busy. There was something brewing on "A" Level. This was the second squad of guards who had crowded them out of the elevator. The speaker horns had been strangely silent all day—not even the hourly government bulletins had been released. Something—some new hell—was brewing.

He was still wondering, an hour later. Alone in the big conference room he methodically made the connections on the number one screen. Five or ten minutes and he'd be done, and then. . . .

He stiffened inwardly at the sound of the opening door. The sharp clatter of voices behind him, and ten or fifteen people filed into the room. Hill didn't turn—he didn't dare to—but the electric wrench trembled in his hand as he heard De Spain's purring voice:

"You, as the governing board of the Ark, have been called to make an emergency decision. Be seated, please, and I'll have the guards bring in Brian O'Day."

O'Day! The name alone was enough to numb Hill's hands. The wrench slipped, and its spinning end hit the screen, stirred a hundred brazen echoes in the room.

De Spain's voice was a lash. "Hill!"

Steven Hill pivoted slowly, his face frozen in the robot's mask, the wrench still held hip high.

"Hill, stop working!" De Spain swung around, spoke to the uniformed guard at his side. "Bring O'Day in."

Hill stayed there, his back pressed hard against the screen, his eyes sweeping the room. De Spain was standing at the head of the table. All twelve of the leather chairs were filled. Hill recognized only two of the Twelve. Anna Overbeck was there, hunched and tiny; Erich Bischoff's twisted body was propped in a special chair.

The door snapped open, and two guards brought Brian O'Day to a place at the foot of the table. The big Irishman shook the guard's hand off his arm. Angry lights glinted in his eyes, and his lips were set in a stubborn line.

"Brian O'Day." De Spain's chill purr cut the thick quiet. "Six months ago you made application for the admittance of your son to the Ark. That application was refused, was it not?"

O'Day's lips twitched. "Yes."

"You signed an oath saying that you would abide by any decisions made by the governing board when you entered the Ark. You didn't think that document was a joke, did you?"

"I did not."

De Spain smiled. "I wanted to be sure of my facts. You knew, then, just what you were doing when you smuggled your son into the Ark. Have you anything to say in your defense?"

"I have."

"Excellent!" De Spain's mocking voice was soft. "We await with interest."

"Thank you, sir." The Irishman's shoulders were squarely set. "My defense is not for myself, but for my son. I broke every rule in the book when I smuggled him in here and concealed him on the animal level. I knew that. And I knew that sooner or later he would be discovered. I had hoped that it would not happen until after the heat had passed, and the new settlement was established.

"You refused my son admittance because of his mother." Cords stood out on O'Day's neck, and sweat shone on his forehead. "I admit that she could not have qualified for admittance here, but you were wrong when you barred Peter Paul. His I.Q. is higher, by ten points, than average, and he has already shown a talent for mechanical engineering."

"COME now, O'Day," De Spain purred, "isn't five years just a little soon to tell all this?"

"No, sir."

"You sound sure, at any rate." De Spain's hand came up in a small gesture. "Take him out."

"De Spain!" O'Day's voice was raw. "What are you going to do to Peter Paul?"

"That decision rests with the Twelve."

"You wouldn't hurt him. . . ." Husky, bitter words. "You wouldn't dare. Not Peter Paul!"

"The rules read that any stowaway shall be—"

Rage came into O'Day's face. He cursed, deep, horrible curses that were torn from deep in his throat.

De Spain's green eyes burned. "Take him out!"

The guards closed in on O'Day. There was a short scuffle, an explosive curse,

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and then the door was shutting behind them.

"That is the case, gentlemen." De Spain leaned back in his chair. "There is, of course, only one thing we can do. The boy, whom you will see presently, will have to be disposed of. There is no place in the Ark for people whose background qualifications will not meet our high standards. This, and all things of its kind, must be handled on a purely scientific plane. The human element must never be allowed to outweigh logic."

"But we will see the boy?" The speaker was a lean-faced man with a pointed red beard. "We should at least do that."

"Right." De Spain nodded at a guard. "Bring him in."

The low, restless murmur of voices filled the wait. Every head turned at the sound of the opening door, every eye in the room clung to the stocky little figure there. The blurring voice sound died, and the bearded man said:

"Come in, young man, and tell us your name."

Hill stared. This *was* O'Day's son. The same dark hair, the same well-boned face, and blue, laughing eyes. He moved with the same lithe sureness his father had, and his voice was low and clear.

"I am Peter Paul O'Day."

The bearded man smiled. "I hear you've been hiding on the animal level. Tell us what happened down there."

"You're nice," Peter Paul said, "much nicer than the guards. One of them hurt my arm."

De Spain cut in then, his soft voice carrying the chill ring of steel. "This is unimportant. We're not here to find out what has happened to the boy, but to decide how to dispose of him."

"You can't!" the bearded man snapped. "This lad has every right to live. Look at him. A perfect specimen!"

De Spain's green eyes smouldered. "You know, of course, that even curs sometimes whelp handsome pups."

"*Ja!*" It was Bischoff's nasal voice. "We should send him outside."

De Spain's hot glance flicked to a guard. "Clear the room," he said. "Everybody but the Twelve."

Peter Paul stiffened as a big guard touched him. Then his eyes went back to the red-bearded man, and he laughed. A child's laughter, thin and brittle, against the deeper voices at the table.

Red-beard asked: "What are you laughing about?"

Peter Paul's hands were doubled into tiny fists. "My father told me to laugh when I was afraid."

"My God!" Red-beard said huskily. "And you want to destroy courage like that. I say no!"

"I say yes!" Bischoff roared.

A guard approached the screens. "Hill, return to your quarters."

Steven Hill stooped, and placed the wrench on the floor. Five or six other voices had joined the argument before he reached the door.

Brian O'Day leaped to his feet when Hill entered their room. His face was worn, drawn, and his voice trembled as he asked: "What—what are they going to do to Pete?"

"They were having an argument about it when I was ordered out of there. As near as I could tell there were only two who wanted Pete dis—sent away. De Spain, and Bischoff."

"Bischoff. I could have told you that guy would second any idea of De Spain's. But the others, they want Pete to stay, huh?"

Hill said: "Right."

O'Day got a cigarette out of his pocket, worried it between his fingers. "Silly, I suppose, to think that the Twelve would show any mercy. What's one life today?" He shredded the cigarette to bits. "Maybe you didn't know, but the whole state of Florida's gone now. So's New Orleans. A tidal wave sixty feet high came up the river right on the tail of a hundred-mile hurricane."

"I'd like to get to a news screen." Hill dropped on the bed. "I'd like to see what's going on."

"Go on in the lounge. I'll come in and order you back in about an hour."

Hill stopped near the door. "Say, how'd the guards happen to find Peter Paul?"

"They didn't just happen to—someone followed me down there, and reported it to 'A' Level."

"But who—"

"That," O'Day said bitterly, "is what I'm going to find out. When I do, there'll be a murder!"

ONLY one of the men grouped around the news screens looked up when Hill approached, and he pulled his eyes quickly away.

"One of them robots," he whispered. "Somebody sent him in here to get rid of him. I don't blame the guy. God knows I wouldn't want the red eyes around me."

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The screen showed a flight of wide-winged army bombers flying in formation. The announcer was saying: "The fleet of planes now arriving carry the last of the government records to be transferred from Washington, D.C., to Denver, Colorado. President Kingston is aboard the leading plane in company with several other officials who have been working night and day to speed the completion of the giant concentration camps which will absorb the population of the coastal cities."

That view shifted, faded. Another image sprang sharply upon the screen, and Jay Forbes' familiarly harsh voice said:

"Broadcasting from De Spain University where this announcer will interview James McCann, one of the few outstanding scientists who have not been quartered in De Spain's huge mountain stronghold."

McCann was seated behind a desk. An egg-bald, long-jawed man whose eyes appeared huge behind thick-lensed glasses.

"Mr. McCann, will you repeat for the listeners what you just told me?"

"Of course." His voice was the flatly toneless voice of a man who is deaf. "I said that there has been no food produced anywhere on the face of the earth in the last six months. That statement needs little explanation. The world's food supply has never been far ahead of the consumer. Not only have all the crops failed, but almost all of the cattle and swine have perished during the first months of terrific heat. The problem of food spoilage is greater now than it has ever been."

"Hill!" O'Day was beside him. "Return to your quarters."

Hill got unhurriedly to his feet and preceded the Irishman out of the room. O'Day was talking almost before he had the door closed.

"They aren't going to do anything to Peter Paul! They had me up there again, and De Spain told me that they'd decided to keep Peter Paul on 'A' Level till they could give him thorough tests."

"Swell," Hill said. "That's the best news I've heard since I've hit this place."

"De Spain didn't want to. That was written all over his face, but the others outvoted him. Anything else and he'd have ignored their vote and ordered Pete killed anyway."

"I don't understand."

"Like this. The next two months are the crucial point in De Spain's plan. He has to have the good will of the Twelve, and this is one way he can get it. The Twelve are as cold-blooded as fish when it comes to the big thing. Sure, they know millions of people are dying, and millions more will die—but that doesn't concern them personally. They never see them, but with Peter Paul it was different. Someone would have to kill him. Someone would have to fire the shot. Even the big-necked guard didn't want that job. He'd kill you or me, if De Spain told him to, but with a kid it's different. De Spain's afraid it might start opposition, that the Twelve might kick over the traces. He can't afford that—not now—and so Pete's safe for a while."

Hill said: "But he says on 'A' Level?"

"Why? Oh—I get it. Listen, Steve, I couldn't take a chance on hurting him, even if I could get up there with a handful of grenades. He's too. . . ."

"Sure," Hill said evenly, "he's important. He's your son, and that makes him more important than anybody else in the world. That puts him above all the millions of men and women who are dying out there now."

"Wait a minute!" O'Day snapped. "You're off. . . ."

"Wait, hell! You're safe and your son's safe, and you don't care about the rest. No, you're one of the *few* who will bring things to a higher plane—with murder!"

"Stop!" O'Day's face was dead white.

The words struck bitterly against Hill's teeth. "Try and stop me! You're like the rest of the swine on 'A' Level. You've put yourself in a special bracket, and the rest of the world is made up of fools who are fit only to die. You're yellow!"

O'Day moved then, his left hand hooking in Hill's jacket, his right smashing, open-palmed, across Hill's mouth. Hill's head went back. He tried to twist free, but O'Day's weight held him tightly in a corner.

"I ought to push your teeth in for that kind of talk," he said thinly. "I would, but you don't know what you're talking about. Steve, listen—if De Spain were dead now and you had all the help there is in the Ark you—*you still couldn't do a thing for the people outside!*"

"What?"

"I cornered Ben Wilson last night. He was one of the staff at Mt. Wilson. This's what he told me. The dynamos were working for a month before the earth

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swung off the orbit. Get that—a full month! Wilson says it would take at least a month to make any change now. You know how much will be left in a month. Now do you see what I mean?"

Hill said: "Yes. Sorry I lost my temper."

"Forget it." O'Day let go of Hill's arms, and got a cigarette out of his pocket. "Wilson's trying to find out exactly what's happening. He tried to tell me what he already knew, but it got too deep for me in a hurry. He'll let us know if there's any chance at all."

"Then—then there's nothing we can do now?"

"Nothing but wait."

"Wait!" Hill said bitterly. "Go look at the news screens. Death everywhere, and the people who are dying have only. . . ."

"I know." O'Day's voice was low and hot. "But if anything happens to De Spain now, we'd all die. De Spain's the only man who knows how to put the world back on its orbit."

Hill was turning away when O'Day said, "You'd better put some of that red stuff in your eyes again. They're coming back to normal."

Hill said, "Thanks."

CHAPTER XIII

MASS MURDER

THE next morning at breakfast the incident occurred which caused all newscasts and official bulletins to be denied all the lower levels.

The single, four-sided news screen hung from the ceiling in the dining room, and was visible from every table. At the breakfast hour it showed a sweeping view of dust-gray fields, of dry riverbeds, of parched and cracking earth. The announcer was speaking, but his voice was lost in the clatter of trays, and the scrape of chairs.

No one knew exactly when the image changed. The spreading wave of silence made most of the men look up, and once they'd seen the face on the screen no power on earth could have pulled their eyes away.

A woman's face, caught with pitiless accuracy by the iscanascope. As ageless as pain itself, grime-streaked, sun-blistered. The lips were horribly swollen, cracked. Each word was limned in bitter agony.

"Water . . . for . . . my . . . baby. . . ."

Somewhere in the big dining room a man swore dully, and a tight voice said, "Turn that damn thing off."

The woman's eyes were pain-glazed, dull. "Water!"

"Here!" A squat man from a table near Hill's bounded to his feet, and snatched an ice-misted pitcher off a serving table. "Here's water. Take it! Take it!" The pitcher spun from his hand, shattered against the screen.

Instantly, a dozen men were scrambling away from the rain of glass. The squat man was laughing—wild loud laughter—and hurling water glasses at the screen.

"Water, damn you, there's your water!"

He was still laughing when the guards closed in on him from three sides. Laughter then changed to snarling curses as he went down under the rush. Hill saw the squat man's eyes as the guards dragged him toward the door; saw the saliva drooling from the corners of his mouth.

"Mad," O'Day whispered. "Completely insane."

The news screen was coldly gray and silent when the clamor abated. And never again, in all that followed, did any of the lower level screens get a newscast.

Early the next morning O'Day was ordered out on a flight, and when he returned he refused to talk about what he'd seen. The second day Hill found him face down on his bed with an empty whiskey bottle still clutched in his outflung hand.

Hill didn't eat that night—he couldn't without an order.

The speaker horns woke him at three-thirty the third morning, calling the pilots for a dawn flight. O'Day upended the whiskey bottle, and cursed dully when he found it empty. His hands shook as he got into his clothes.

"What kind of flights are these?" Hill asked.

"Observation jobs. We're lookin' straight into the front door of hell. And it isn't going to get any better—the mechanics are working over the bombing fleet. Three of the boys folded up yesterday. The heat got 'em." O'Day shrugged his jacket tight across his shoulders, turned. "Don't forget the fluid for your eyes, Steve."

Hill said, "I won't," and watched O'Day's back go through the door. There was no use worrying O'Day. No use telling him that the fluid was almost gone. Only enough for two days remained in

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the tiny bottle, and Anna Overbeck's laboratory on "A" Level was as inaccessible as the moon.

Hill ate, that morning, under a guard's direction and then reported to the animal level. A big-shouldered ruddy-faced man met him at the elevator.

"Hill reporting to Jackson for work."

"Another dummy," Jackson grunted. "There's one good thing about you guys, you don't talk back."

Jackson led the way to a long stable; showed Hill a mop and a hose, and left him there. Hill breathed a thankful prayer as the long morning dragged away. It was dark in the stable—blessedly dark—and as long as he worked here he could make the precious eye fluid last. No one would notice—if he stayed in the shadows—that his eyes were not red.

A surly guard brought lunch. He tossed the paper container at Hill's feet, snapped. "Hill, eat that, and then go back to work."

Again Hill grinned. Another injection saved. If he didn't have to go back to "B" Level to eat he didn't have to use the fluid. He scooped up the container and made his way to a dark corner.

It happened then.

Hill was still munching his first bite when the hot white flare of a flashlight hit him full in the face, and Jackson's voice said:

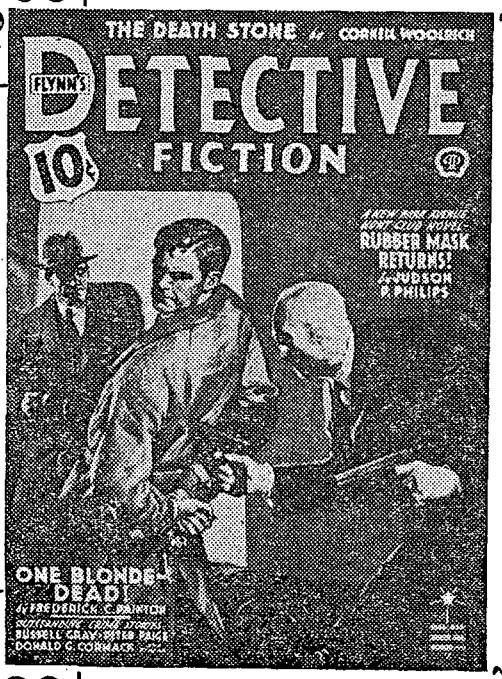
"Hill, when you're through eatin' come out to the stock pen and. . . ." Jackson's voice choked off, and the silence stretched thin and taut. "I thought you were a dummy!"

Hill kept his face stiff. He couldn't speak without a direct order. The glaring light flicked away from his face. Jackson took two backward steps, said, "Hill, come out to the stock pen when you're through eatin'."

THE bobbing light was still in sight when Hill got the tiny vial out of his pocket, squeezed two precious drops into each eye. He knew it was a forlorn hope. Jackson would ask questions, and De Spain would call him back to "A" Level. Once there, and under the lie detector, the finish wouldn't be far away. For a grand and gallant old lady, and for him.

The order came just after dinner. The booming words seemed to echo hollowly through the corridors long after Hill started to move.

"Steven Hill go to 'A' Level at once!"



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That was all, but the horns might as well have said: "Steven Hill and Anna Overbeck to the pay-off." De Spain would see that there were no errors made this time. When he finished they'd either be robots, or they'd be dead!

All because Jackson had seen him without the red fluid in his eyes!

The elevator doors yawned to swallow Hill. He realized in that tight second that he had not used the fluid in his eyes since noon. Nearly seven hours, and an injection lasted barely four! Nerves did that. He was tossing his one slim chance to come out of this alive because of nerves.

He had the vial out, and the injection in one eye when the elevator started. The jolting shock of the swift acceleration jarred the tiny vial from his fingers. Before he could pick it up the few remaining drops were gone, spreading in a red stain upon the soft floor of the elevator.

There was nothing for it then. A drop or less remained in the eye-dropper. Hill rolled back the lid, felt it sting lightly upon the ball of his eye. Then the elevator door was open and he was walking with a robot's slow, stiff stride down the blue-walled hall.

A guard ordered him into the big conference room.

The conference room wasn't the same. The long table was gone. One wall had dropped into the floor to reveal a long, man-dialed, curiously intricate control board. Six men sat in front of that board. The hunchbacked Bischoff was there, and the lean-faced, red-bearded man. There was a microphone in front of each man, and each wore a peculiar headset.

The guard ordered Hill into a corner and left him there. A scant moment later a small figure bounded toward him and Peter Paul O'Day's light voice asked:

"Who're you, mister? Why're you here?"

Hill's throat tightened, but his face held the stiff expressionless robot's mask. At least the boy was still safe. O'Day would be glad to hear that.

"Come here, Peter."

Hill didn't have to turn his head. The voice was enough. Theta De Spain, and —unless his mental picture of De Spain was wrong, she, too, would face the red grids of the lie detector soon. Her part in the faked operation would come out—no human could lie to that merciless machine.

Theta's dark eyes came up to brush his face. She said, "Hill, sit down in one of those chairs at the end of the room."

Her eyes clung to his face as he began to move and her lips formed a single whispered word. "Careful!" Hill nodded, and moved past her to the chair.

HE COULD see the news screens on the wall opposite him. All six of them were lighted, but all six were silent. Moving strips of voiceless film which portrayed only disaster.

A burning town where fat yellow flames and smoke curled upward. Only one man showed on the screen. A wasted, ragged creature who fell twice in twenty-five feet as he ran toward the 'scope.

Then an ocean liner loosed in a wreckage-jammed harbor. A group of savages down in front of a squatting idol, a rain-lashed desert town, and a few figures who lay, unheeding, in the downpour. . . .

A single brazen note, struck from the heart of some sweet-throated gong, shattered the taut quiet. The central disc swung down from the ceiling. De Spain's coldly smooth face leaped into being there, and his purring voice said:

"Report!"

"Maximum temperature in Rome today was two hundred twelve degrees." Bischoff spilled guttural words into his microphone. "The only people left alive there are those who could buy refuge in the catacombs. Budapest temperature was two hundred and four degrees, and there is no complete information at hand as to the number of dead."

Peter O'Day's light voice cut through the report. "Theta, I'm sleepy."

"Just a minute, Peter."

"I'm sleepy now."

"San Francisco, Portland, Seattle and fifty or a hundred small towns along the coast have been destroyed."

"Theta . . . "

Hill's eyes jerked back to Theta and the boy. She was still motionless, but he had slipped off his chair and dropped to his knees. He was . . . good God, he was praying!

"Our father who art in heaven. . . ."

Praying! Praying in the room where the murder of countless millions of people had been planned! Murder! No, murder wasn't strong enough. There must be another word.

Bischoff's voice: "Shanghai reports a famine and a water shortage—"

The boy's clear even words: *" . . . hallowed be thy name. . . ."*

Alpha De Spain's face was motionless

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De Spain would destroy the earth by driving it into the sun!

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upon the screen, and might have been carved from some pale cold metal. His eyes alone seemed alive.

". . . Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those . . ."

"Communication with Port Said stopped a week ago, and we have marked that city as completely wiped out."

Hill's teeth caught his lips. He bit down to choke back the curses that boiled up in his throat. The dull taste of blood was in his mouth as he stared across the room.

". . . lead us not into temptation. . . ."

The low sob brought Hill's eyes swinging to Theta's face. She met his glance for just a second, and then dropped her face into her hands. Tears squeezed between her fingers and glistened in the hot light.

". . . For thine is the kingdom. . . ."

"The White Death epidemic reached its height in Chicago today. All attempt at medical treatment has been abandoned. The military police found themselves unable to handle the water riots there. . . ."

". . . and the glory. Amen."

Amen! That was the word! Amen for the human race, for charity, for kindness, for. . . .

The central screen darkened, and a guard appeared suddenly. "Hill, on your feet. De Spain wants to see you."

Steven Hill heaved himself upright, moved deliberately toward the door. Amen! Yes, even Amen for him!

CHAPTER XIV

DE SPAIN SPREADS DISEASE

STEVEN HILL climbed the three steps to Alpha De Spain's quarters. He moved in a loose-kneed shambling stride; his arms dangled limply at his sides. His shoulders drooped, and his mouth hung open.

Hill was looking full at De Spain then, fighting to keep the dull expression on his face. To keep his hatred from shining through the reddened pupils of his eyes.

Alpha De Spain was alone in the room. One slim hand lay on the arm of the deeply cushioned chair. The other was pulled in close to his body, and the wicked glitter of a Delta gun showed there.

De Spain's eyes were bits of polished green metal. "Your record shows that you have an Unlimited Power license. How did you acquire that?"

"I was selected with one other member of my class through the Hyke reaction tests. We were assigned to the Army school of advance flying throughout our summer vacations. I have flown every type of army ship, but specialized in the single place, long range over-weather combat ships."

"You have had gunnery and bombing instruction?"

"Yes, sir."

"Very well." De Spain's pointed chin dropped to touch his silken scarf. "Hill, you will report to the Hangar Level in the morning."

"Yes, sir." For one desperate instant Hill thought of trying to dive past the muzzle of the Delta gun. His leg muscles were stiffening when he remembered O'Day's words: "De Spain is the only man alive who knows enough to put the world back on its orbit."

"Hill, return to your quarters."

Hill swung around and went back across the white rug to the door. A guard moved away from the bottom of the steps and Hill shambled past him to the elevator.

The doors snapped back and Hill was inside before he saw Theta De Spain's slender figure pressed back against the wall. Pallor showed through the darker cast of her skin, her lips were a crimson wound.

The clang of the closing doors was still ringing in his ears when she spoke. "I've been trying for two days to get a chance to give you this." She pushed a flat package toward him. "It's from Anna. She said the fluid you had would be nearly gone now."

"It is," Hill said, "but aren't you putting yourself in a dangerous spot?"

"Here."

Their hands touched. An electric something came into being between them, an age-old desire. His voice was husky. "Theta."

She said: "Anna was afraid they'd know you weren't a robot."

"Look at me, Theta."

Slowly her eyes came up. His hands caught her shoulders. "I knew you'd change," he said. "You had to. You can see now what a horrible thing this destruction is. You can see that your father is murdering the world."

"What?"

Something flamed in Hill's brain then, and he swept her close, pressed his lips hard against her vivid mouth. For just

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an instant she was passive against him, and then she twisted out of his arms.

"You—you lout!" Hot color burned in her cheeks. "We gave you this chance so you'd realize that father is the greatest man the world has ever known. That this is the real beginning of man's progress, and that from this day—"

Hill said: "You fool, you poor fool!"

She slapped him then, her hand smacking viciously across his mouth. The crack of her palm against his flesh was the only sound. Hill didn't move. She stepped back, pressed her shoulders hard against the wall.

"The mistake was mine." Hill's voice came from low in his throat. "You're one of the same litter of rats. You'd better tell your father that Anna's operation didn't take. Tell him, while there's still time. Tell him, or one day soon he and I will face each other across a room where there are no barrier walls. I'll kill him then."

Her hand crept to the control panel, and his words were lost in the bulletlike drop of the elevator. Hill pivoted sharply, and was waiting when the doors opened. He strode out of the elevator without speaking, without looking back. The stormy anger still burned in his head when he reached his room.

O'DAY was stuffing clothes into a bag when Hill came in. He turned and said: "I'm leaving you, Steve. All flyers have been moved to the hangar level."

"I know," Hill said, "I'm going up there, too."

"What?"

Hill explained briefly, and then asked, "What's the idea in the change of quarters?"

"Heat. The lower levels are kept at seventy degrees, and the hangar level will be kept at a hundred and ten. That way there won't be such a difference when we go out on flights. The planes are insulated and air cooled, but the best cooling equipment can't do much in a plane. A lot of the boys have gone to the hospital in the last couple of days. You'll think you're riding on hell's front door."

"But why all these flights?" Hill asked. "What possible good can De Spain get out of them?"

O'Day's bleak eyes raked Hill's face. "You'll find out soon enough. Too soon."

Nor would he say more. Hill wondered about that while he packed his clothes. O'Day had called them Observation Flights once, but now that Hill was going out he wouldn't say anything at all.

Hill had his first glimpse of the women's side of the Ark late that afternoon. He and O'Day had dropped their bags in a hot little room on the Hangar Level, and then O'Day said: "The doctor will have to check you over if you're goin' out tomorrow. I'll take you down to the hospital."

A white-capped nurse looked up from her desk as they came into a small lounge. O'Day nodded, said, "Hill, sit down."

Hill backed clumsily into a chair. He could feel the nurse's wide eyes on his face, could almost see the horror come into her glance as she saw his eyes.

The door opened then, and the tall man came in. He nodded at O'Day. "Come inside where we can talk." He led the way past the desk, and into a small, sparsely furnished office.

"Hill," O'Day murmured, "this's Johnny Barclay. We were in a couple of wars together before he found out he could do more damage in a hospital. You can forget the robot stuff. He knows what's going on."

Barclay's face was lean and dark. He had a thin blade of a nose, and deep-set dark eyes. A thin scar curved up from his chin and across his cheekbone. He smiled at Hill and got a cigarette out of a box on the table.

"They've been giving you a little hell from what Brian tells me."

"It could be worse."

"Yes, it could." Barclay turned to O'Day. "Brian, I've got bad news. Timmy St. John got away from his nurse last night. He hung himself in one of the storerooms. They didn't find him until an hour ago."

"He's—he's dead?"

Barclay inclined his head. "Sorry, Brian."

O'Day's hands came up in a tight gesture. "That's one more thing!" he said in a harsh, bitter voice. "One more thing De Spain has to pay for."

"He had imagination, Brian. That's a one way ticket out on flight patrol."

"I know." The cords in O'Day's neck stood out. "You'd better give Hill an examination. He'll be flyin' in St. John's place in the morning. We've got a nice job this time. De Spain's fixed a couple of gallons of typhoid culture to drop in the lake above the big concentration camp."

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Barclay swore. "Brian! You can't do that!"

"No? And what happens if we don't? The bomb trips have a very cute little device attached to them. A nice little camera that takes a picture of the bomb on its way down. God help us if that picture doesn't check with the map."

"Listen!" Hot lights came into Barclay's eyes. "Brian, you can't do that. God knows those people have enough hell now. I'll kill you with my bare hands if you do."

"Easy, Johnny. I don't like it any better than you do. Once I'd planned to drop those things any place but that wouldn't do any good. They'd just send another ship out to do the job. You can't beat that camera—I've tried—so St. John and I did the only thing we could. We took the culture out of the bombs and dropped them empty!"

"You what!"

"We unloaded the bombs."

The surgeon's splayed fingers touched O'Day's arm. "But—but what did you do with the culture?"

"There's an electric forge on the hangar level." O'Day's eyes burned. "One of those cartridges will just fit that forge. I've been running the temperature up to five thousand degrees. If any bugs can crawl out of that they're welcome."

"Wait a minute." Barclay fumbled in his desk. "That rates a drink, Brian."

"Never mind me. You go to work on Hill; we haven't got all day."

Barclay grinned as he reached for his stethoscope. "You pig-headed Irishman!"

"MORNING flight!"

Hill awakened with the brazen voice of the horns ringing in his ears. He rubbed the sleep out of his eyes and rolled over to find O'Day already dressing.

"On your feet," the Irishman said. "We've got ten minutes to dress and get our coffee."

"Right." Hill swung his legs off the bed.

O'Day gulped his scalding coffee in silence. Scant minutes later he was leading Hill to the elevator. A white-jumpered mechanic met them as they walked toward the big red bomber which was waiting in front of the hangar door.

The bomber's two motors were running. O'Day lowered his head against the slipstream, and led the way to the cabin. A mechanic closed the throttles, and slipped out of the control seat.

"She's ready, sir." He touched his cap brim. "Fuel, bombs, everything." He slipped past O'Day to the door.

O'Day didn't speak.

Then the huge doors were opening, and the bomber rolled out in the faint darkness of the false dawn. The right wing motor growled throatily, and the plane swung around. Hill noticed the thousands of bits of paper scattered on the runway. Fragments that rose in a billowing cloud as the motor thunder deepened.

Hill glanced down just as the first fence flashed under the wings. There was a yawning gap in that fence, and in the next. Then he saw the wreck. It had been a plane, but it would have been impossible to have even guessed the type. One crumpled silver wing glimmered in the faint light; the cabin was split like a broken melon. A gust of wind stirred bits of gaily colored paper from the wreck.

Hill caught O'Day's eyes and asked, "Whose ship was that?"

"Guy by the name of Phillip Duncan. He had the munitions business by the throat once. He had more millions than a hound has fleas, and he brought eight or ten with him in that plane. The dispatcher refused him permission to land, but he came in anyway. The fool thought money would buy his way into the Ark. You saw what was left."

Icy fingers touched Hill's back. There was no longer any wealth. Charity, love, kindness—gone, all of them gone. They were just names, just words, just bits of gaily colored paper swirling in the slip stream of De Spain's planes.

O'Day switched on the automatic pilot, turned. "Come on, guy, we've got work to do."

The bomb bay was a tiny, hot-walled compartment. The trap-door was closed. Four bombs—shining, slim-bellied, deadly—hung in the guides. Their glistening tips were scant inches from the doors.

O'Day talked as he slipped out of his shirt. "The camera's there in the center. The shutter trips when the door opens, and the picture had better be right." He squatted on the foot-wide band of metal which rimmed the door. "Don't step off the catwalk, Steve, it's a long way down."

The sun was up now, and it was unbelievably hot in the airless compartment. Sweat ran into Hill's eyes, dripped from the point of his chin as he knelt beside O'Day.

Hill didn't have to be told what to do. His hands went out, with O'Day's, to the

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bomb snout. Nor did he have to be told that death was very close to them as they started to loosen the threads. Once, in training school, Hill had seen a bomber explode in mid-air. Had seen the ragged crimson flash that ripped the heavens, the fragments that drifted earthward.

"Easy!" O'Day whispered. "Take it easy, Steve!"

Hill's breath hissed through fixed teeth. The smooth metal slipped in his sweating hands. The nose piece was off. "I've got it!" O'Day snapped. Great ropes of muscle stood out in his shoulders as he held it, suspended, at arm's length.

Now! Hill had to reach up inside the bomb, release a tiny clamp, and let the glass cartridge slide out into his hand. If he missed, if the glass nicked the edge of the nose cap, then death stepped into the picture. Horrible, unescapable death! De Spain alone knew what those cartridges contained. Typhoid and White Death, enough to kill a hundred thousand men.

There was a sharp click, and the tube dropped into his clutching fingers. Hill's skin crawled as he drew it out, tilted it to pass the nose cap, and then placed it gently on the catwalk.

Then he added his strength to O'Day's for the job of replacing the nose cap.

O'Day's teeth flashed white. "Three more!"

They inched around the catwalk. Three more times they repeated that operation. Three times they juggled death with slippery fingers. Then they were panting, staring at the row of glass cartridges.

O'DAY sucked a breath deep into his lungs, mopped the sweat out of his eyes. "Half done. Now we've got to keep a bunch of gunners from shooting us down while we try to lay those harmless eggs."

"Gunners!"

"Sure." O'Day got to his feet. "They don't know what we're tryin' to drop in their water supply, but they're takin' no chances. They'll be waitin."

They were.

The first puff of white smoke mushroomed beneath them as O'Day slanted the red bomber steeply down. The next was closer, the plane rocked and bounced in the blast.

Hill's eyes were glued to the bomb sights. Far below, like silver coins scattered on a dark carpet a chain of lakes glimmered in the sun. Down. Down. The

Statement of the ownership, management, circulation, etc., required by the Acts of Congress of August 24, 1912, and March 3, 1933, of FAMOUS FANTASTIC MYSTERIES, published monthly at New York, N. Y., for October 1, 1942.

State of NEW YORK }
County of NEW YORK } ss.:

Before me, a Notary Public, in and for the State and county aforesaid, personally appeared THOMAS W. DEWART, who, having been duly sworn according to law, deposes and says that he is the Vice-President of The Frank A. Munsey Company, publisher of FAMOUS FANTASTIC MYSTERIES, and that the following is, to the best of his knowledge and belief, a true statement of the ownership, management, etc., of the aforesaid publication for the date shown in the above caption, required by the Act of August 24, 1912, as amended by the Act of March 3, 1933, embodied in Section 537, Postal Laws and Regulations, to wit:

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THOMAS W. DEWART, Vice-President.

Sworn to and subscribed before me this 6th day of October, 1942.

ANN C. DALY, Notary Public, Kings County No. 65. Certificate filed in New York County No. 130. New York Registers No. 4-D-68. Term Expires March 30, 1944.

(SEAL)

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motor howl rose to a bellowing, then died. Terminal velocity! Hill grinned. The motors were useless now, the red plane was cometing earthward as fast as it could ever move. Hill's body seemed to float off the seat and tighten the straps.

A rocket shell burst above them, and the blue flash seemed to fill the sky. The center lake grew to fill the sights. A red light winked in front of Hill. He counted the pulse beat of the light. One, two, three. . . . The trip levers burned his hands. Six, seven, eight. . . .

The light went out.

Hill snapped the levers down. He had barely time to see the bombs streak downward as the ship went up and over in a wild tight bank.

All of O'Day's matchless skill showed then in the twisting course he flew. Sheer speed alone would never do. The anti-aircraft were too efficient for that, and had been since 1960. O'Day dove close to the ground, hedge-hopped at five hundred miles an hour. Then, somehow, the noise and the crimson streaked sky were behind them.

Hill went back to the seat at O'Day's side.

O'Day's eyes were raking the sky. "You'll find brandy in that compartment under the seat. I need a drink."

Hill wordlessly passed O'Day the bottle.

The Irishman drank. "We've got luck, Steve. It was poor gunnery that saved our bacon. That, and the fact that they didn't have any planes in the air when we dove. We could outrun 'em, but you can't outrun a rocket shell." He glanced at his strap watch. "Turn on the radio, it's time for the hourly bulletin."

"I thought De Spain was. . . ."

O'Day shrugged. "Why should De Spain try to keep the radio from us? We see it all anyway. The news screens on the hangar level are still running, too."

A harsh, hurried voice spilled out of the speaker: "An unmarked plane dropped four bombs in the lake above the central concentration camp and escaped the battery of anti-aircraft guns. The fact that there were guns there was sheer accident. Authorities are at loss to account for the strange bombing, and are now trying to trace the ship.

"The First American Expedition to the Arctic today returned to report in full to President Kingston. The information released lends little hope to the plan of a settlement in the Arctic regions. From observations taken there it was ascertained that the temperature there will rise to three hundred degrees before the end of the month. . . ."

Hill swore, and O'Day said, "Try the brandy, Steve; enough of it helps a little. You can forget some of the things you see and hear." He shuddered. "The news screens are the worst."

"News screens!" Hill whispered. "That means that the Universal planes are still going!"

CHAPTER XV

MEN LIKE WOLVES

JAY FORBES slipped his arms into the shoulder straps of the portable iscanascope pack, and tugged the white hood of his coveralls up over his head. His face was covered with an inch-deep layer of some kind of grease. His hands were gloved.

"Ready?" he asked the two who crouched in the shadow of the plane.

Paul Grey's face was worn and thin under the protective grease. His teeth flashed white. "Carry on, sucker."

"How about you, Penny?"

"Right, boss." Penny Martin would never again carry her laughter like a bright shield. She had seen too much pain, too much suffering and horror and death. Her eyes burned, and there was a feverish brightness in her cheeks.

"Carry on." She tried very hard to match Grey's lightly ironical tone, and failed. There was no lightness left in the world.

The plan had sounded fine and brave and strong a week before. They'd been in the basement of De Spain University when Forbes suggested that she come with them. She'd come, gladly, to be with him; to help make this moving record of the extinction of men, but now there was only pain.

Days of hiding from the sun. Swift, endless flights. They had stolen fuel and food. She'd cut her hair and worn men's clothes.

"We'll shoot it from the top of the hill." Jay was talking again. "They'll attack as soon as the sun goes down, and we'll have plenty of light for a long range pick-up. We've got an hour before we're due on the air."

Grey nodded and turned to pick up the ten pound Delta machine gun. He'd spent hours padding the metal grip so it

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wouldn't burn his fingers. Now he slipped a six-hundred-shot drum in place.

"They might cut us off from the plane," he said grimly. "That would be anything but sweet."

Jay led the way up the slope through a thick growth of dead underbrush. He stopped often, and it took their combined strength to keep the black cable moving. That cable unwound from a reel on the plane, and connected the portable iscanascope with the master control board.

Thirty minutes later they were crawling up the last steep pitch to stop in the shade of a clump of boulders. Jay got fieldglasses out of his pocket, raked the far side of the valley.

Grey squatted beside him with the machine gun across his knees. "What do you see?"

"The mouth of the cave is barricaded. There are a couple of pretty good-sized guns there. The pack is forming on both sides. They're going to try to come straight along the face of the cliff where the guns can't find them."

Grey bent over the portable control board, flicked a switch. He waited a moment and then said, "You might as well pick it up now, there's nothing on the air."

"I will." Forbes threw Penny a twisted smile as he set the iscanascope up on its tiny tripod. He slipped off his glove, made quick deft adjustments. "This kind of a pick-up's tough, Penny. The 'scope has to be on a tripod to keep the image from blurring. I'll have to use glasses to see the action."

She was face down beside a rock. Her "Right, boss," was faint.

Forbes put the small microphone on the ground beside him, steadied the field glasses on a small log. A moment later he said, "Pick it up!"

Grey opened a switch, and then nodded.

Forbes spilled clipped words into the microphone: "Universal Newscasting Unit Two, ladies and gentlemen, newscasting from a hilltop overlooking the mouth of the Oregon Caves. If you will look closely at the screen you can see the glitter of gun steel in the cavern mouth, and moving figures closing in from both sides."

Forbes' speech ran on while he watched the attacking groups edge closer to the sides of the cave door. He didn't know who held the cave, but he knew the attackers, too well. Twice in the past week he'd fought like groups away from the plane.

Wolf packs! Criminals, escaped convicts, riff-raff, driven back a thousand years by the approach of unescapable death. Slinking, heavily armed creatures who slept by day and roved at night. Might was their only law. Food and water their driving urges. They would attack any refuge without warning.

The fieldglasses showed them moving up. Half-naked, dirty, dangerous. Gunfire flashed across the valley then, and they could hear the faint sound of the Delta guns.

Forbes' voice never changed. One hour passed and another. He described the first unsuccessful attack, and then the second. The blood-red sun was gone then, and purple shadows touched the cave mouth.

Fifteen minutes later he could see only the stabbing flashes of gun-flame.

Grey touched his shoulder. Forbes looked up to see the pilot holding both gloved thumbs down. Forbes nodded, and made a swift closing speech.

"Darkness prevents any further newscast of this scene."

GREY disconnected the cable, swung the portable unit to his shoulders. They made their difficult way back down the hill. Once at the plane Forbes touched a switch, and the automatic reel pulled the cable in.

Penny slipped out of her coveralls, opened her shirt at the throat, and dropped on a bunk. Forbes brought her a cup of water.

"Thanks, boss," she smiled at him. "Guess I wasn't much help that trip."

"You need sleep," Forbes said.

Grey climbed into the cabin then, and racked the machine gun. "Where to now?"

"How about the Eastern cities?" Forbes asked. "New York and Washington?"

Grey shrugged. "It's all right with me, guy, but what's the point? There can't be many sets left, and those that are running aren't much interested in the grief we put on their screens."

"What else is there?" Penny asked.

"Nothing I guess." Grey wiped the grease off his face. "This is one way to go out, and it beats sitting in one of those concentration camps. That is really hell."

"Why don't we go north?" Penny's head dropped back against the cushions. "That would be better than this. Maybe

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we could find some place cool—even for one night."

An angry bleakness came into Forbes' face. "I know one place where they've received screens. De Spain has them in his place. Steven Hill's there too. At least Steve can see what it's like here where the rest of the world is."

"Jay! You know Steve wouldn't have picked that job. You know he'd have stayed with you if he could have."

"Yeah, but once he got to De Spain's he stayed there. What right has he got to live when the rest of us can't? Maybe he didn't pick the job, but he didn't turn it down. Do you want to know why he stayed? It's cool there. They've got water, plenty of cold water, and food and . . . ." He licked at blackened lips. "Sorry, Penny, but every once in a while it catches up with me. Some people get all the breaks. I wouldn't want to be there myself, but I wish to God you were."

"Silly." Her hand went up to touch his face. "What would I do without you?"

"It's none of my business," Grey drawled from the doorway. "But if I had a friend in De Spain's joint I'd be parked on the doorstep." He grinned then. "Yeah, Jay and I tried that once, and he shot the doorstep out from under us."

Forbes said: "I still think Steve is—"

"No, Jay."

"I won't say it again." Forbes stepped close to the bunk, stooped to kiss her cheek. She stirred uneasily, said; "Jay! Jay, darling."

Forbes didn't move. The cold breath of fear touched his heart. Penny's cheek had been burning hot under his lips. The dry, feverish heat which preceded White Death. Forbes' hand came up to his mouth.

Grey broke the tense silence. "We'd better go some place—and soon. We'll be needing fuel again tonight, and the water tanks are nearly empty."

Forbes said: "Right away." He bathed Penny's face with a damp towel, placed another over her eyes. She was whispering of school, of the swimming races, of cool water when he strapped her in the bunk.

The motors were ticking over when Forbes climbed into the pilot's compartment. Grey's eyes flicked over Forbes' face, and then Grey said thinly, "I'm sorry, guy, I really am."

"You knew?"

"I've been afraid of it for a couple of days. The doc said that injection he gave her might not work. Remember?"

Forbes did remember the doctor's fatigue-drawn mouth, his utterly weary voice. "This is the last of my serum. I can't promise that it will do any good, but there's no more available anywhere." Then the husky bitterness of the chief's voice seemed to burn his mind. "There isn't anything you can do for White Death—but pray!"

"We've got six hours fuel left." Grey studied the tip of his cigarette. "We can go down the coast."

Forbes cursed him. "Not yet! You're tryin' to bury her and she's still alive. She'll stay alive!"

"Steady, guy. That's the closest way to the concentration camps. Maybe we can find a doctor there. You take care of her. I'll fly this crate."

Forbes nodded dumbly, turned back to the cabin.

CHAPTER XVI

THETA DECIDES

STEVEN HILL lay quite still on the surgery table while Barclay used the stethoscope on his chest. There was a quizzical tightness around the doctor's mouth, and his brows were pulled down.

Hill asked, "What's the answer, Doc?"

"You don't fly tomorrow, and neither does O'Day. You've lost five pounds today. That's not excessive for this kind of flyin' but it's too much to fool with. The rest will do you both good."

"You're wrong again, Doc." O'Day lounged into the room. A cigarette drooped in one corner of his mouth, and he carried a tray of three tall glasses. "I spend my time making you a drink, and now you're trying to tell me I have to stay on the ground. Nothing doing."

Hill grinned as he got into his jacket. "Well, we can use the drink anyway."

"Hello, firebrand." Barclay took one of the glasses and dropped into a chair. "You can use my liquor and then you try to tell me what to do. No, my friend, you'll stay. I won't promise you'll like it, but you'll stay. Try getting a ship out of here without my clearance."

"I've got to fly. The bombs . . . the other guys won't take the disease cartridge out of the bombs."

"Listen." Barclay's lean face was set. "You're not flying. Only three ships are going out tomorrow, and they're on an

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observation job. There are no bombing trips scheduled so you don't have to worry."

"Thank God." O'Day drained his glass, stood up. "I'll get some sleep then. You're sure Peter Paul will be all right?"

"Of course. It's nothing but a light fever. He'll be back on his feet tomorrow."

"Hey!" Excitement came into Hill's voice. "Is Peter Paul here?"

"He's in three forty-three. There's a friend of yours with him now." O'Day pivoted on one heel and went out.

Hill paused uncertainly. "That will be down the corridor to the . . . ."

"To the right," Barclay supplied. "Three sixty-five is a lounge if you want to talk."

"Thanks."

" . . . friend of yours. . . ." The words whispered through Hill's mind as he strode down the corridor. With the exception of O'Day and Barclay he knew only one person in the Ark. Theta De Spain.

Why, he wondered savagely, had he snatched at this chance to talk to her again? She represented everything he hated, her father was the brain behind the destruction of the human race. He had once tried to kill her father, and an hour later she had saved his reason.

He knew then, knew it as surely as he knew day follows night. God help him, he was in love with Theta De Spain.

He had nearly reached the end of the corridor when she came out of a doorway, and turned to see him. She said "Steven!" and ran to his side.

"Hello, Theta." He looked down at the familiar lovely oval of her face. "What's the trouble?"

"I've been hunting for you," she said breathlessly. "I called the Hangar Level but they said you were down here. I was afraid to use the speaker system, and so I came here to wait. I thought you'd be in to see Peter Paul."

Hill waited silently.

"It's difficult for me to say this." She looked away quickly. "You remember when you received that long distance Visa-phone call from Washington? I was operating the delay control on that, and I had both pictures on the control screens on 'A' Level. I—I saw Jay and Penny get married."

Hill said, "Yes?"

Her fingers trembled on his arm, and her dark eyes were troubled. "Steve, I *am* sorry. They're in trouble. I heard him newscasting. I—I fixed the master controls so that the screen in the lounge down here works."

"What kind of trouble?" Hill grasped her shoulders.

"Penny is sick, Steve."

"Where is that screen?"

"This way." She led him back down the corridor, and along a connecting corridor. Then she wordlessly indicated the door, and stepped aside for him to pass.

"You're here," he said harshly, "you might as well stay."

Hill swayed to a stop before the glowing screen. The image there was vividly real, too real. Jay Forbes' face was pictured with bleak and pitiless accuracy. He had aged thirty years in as many days. Deep lines bracketed his mouth, webbed the taut skin around his sunken eyes.

Even his voice was the dry, rustling voice of an old man. "Universal Newscasting Plane, eastbound for Helena, Montana. Our standard sending equipment is not working, and I am using this method of contacting the concentration camp at Helena. We will arrive there in twenty minutes. Please have a doctor on the field with serum used to fight White Death. . . . Hello, Helena, you can reach us over standard wavelength. Our receiving set is still working. Hello, Helena. . . ."

Hill's throat was tight. His hands came up and he said, "Jay, you. . . ."

The image on the screen blurred, faded. Hill turned to find Theta beside him. She was pale. "He'll be back in a minute," she said. "He's getting their answer now."

"HELLO, Helena! Hello, Helena!" Jay's sweat-streaked face was again on the screen. "You've got to give us the serum. This isn't for me, it's for a woman! It's for. . . ." His voice broke and for a taut second there was only the hum of the screen. "For my wife."

The image jerked, and a second face appeared on the screen. A lined and bitter face. The face of a man who has long been beyond caring, whose eyes were pain-glazed. His voice was raw.

"They say they haven't any serum, Jay. That they haven't even enough for the sick in the camp. I guess that's it."

"They've got to!" Forbes' mouth twitched. "Hello, Helena! Hello, Helena! Look!" His face vanished from the screen. There was a flash of white, and then Penny's pale, set face showed there.

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"Look, Helena! You can see it's for a woman. You can see. . . ."

Her face was thin, terribly thin and still. Her hair was a dark swirl against the white of the pillow. Only her cheeks had color, and that a feverish, flame-bright red.

"You've got to, Helena!" Forbes' voice rasped on. "You can't refuse aid to a woman. You can't do that!"

The flat voice of the second man cut in then. "They say it's no use, Jay. They haven't got the serum."

Penny's lips were moving, but no sound came from her. There was the quick flutter of pulse in her throat.

The screened image blurred and faded again. The hot silence stretched thin long before Jay's voice came out of the empty greyness of the screen.

"It wouldn't make any difference now, Paul. Not if there was all the serum in the world. Put the ship around, and we'll head out to sea."

The second man's words were low, choked. "I'm sorry, guy, but maybe it's better. She's out of this hell now. You can be sure of one thing, the rest of us won't be far behind."

"Right, Paul."

"Dead," the word was a dull taste on Hill's lips. "Penny's dead." He looked down to find that he had been clutching Theta's wrist all this time. He loosened his grip, stared dumbly at the purple bruises his fingers had left. He said, "Why didn't you tell me I was hurting you, Theta?"

She didn't look up. "It didn't matter."

"I should have—"

The harsh voice of the screen cut him short. "We will follow. Yes, that's right. The world is dying, the hordes of man will be soon forgotten. We die, and De Spain's selected four thousand go on living. That's justice."

Forbes' face was again on the screen. His lips were thin, gray; and strange hot lights burned in his eyes. "Universal Plane calling Alpha De Spain's headquarters. Calling Mr. Steven Hill. You've seen this, for if there are screens anywhere they are in the cool depths of your hideout.

"Steven Hill, one of the finest. How do you like the things you've seen the last month? And how do you like to look at your face in the mirror and know that you'll have to go on looking at it year after year? When the rest of us are gone.

"Sure. Maybe it won't bother you, but I thought you were a different kind of a guy. We went to school, remember, and I didn't think you'd crawl into a fortress and let the rest of the world die without raising a hand to help. You might have saved a few—you might have saved Penny!

"I know. If you'd tried to help one you'd have had to help everybody, and that would have meant there wouldn't have been plenty of food and water for you."

Hill was swaying, staring at Forbes' tight-lipped face. The harsh words were like knives in his mind.

Forbes' hand came up in a mocking half-salute. "Steve, we had a toast once, remember? You ought to have a tall glass, where you are, a tall glass with ice to tinkle against its sides. There's no glass here, Steve, and damn little water. But I'll drink that toast with you anyway. Remember, damn you! *May you live forever, and I never die!*"

Hill whispered through stiff lips. "Jay, you can't believe . . . ."

"STEVEN HILL," the mocking voice of the screen ran on, "the man who had to live forever. It's all right, Steve, you know what you wanted, and how to get it. Penny didn't." Forbes' lips twitched. *"May you live forever, damn you!"*

"Jay!"

Forbes' voice died and the screen went gray. Hill stood there staring.

"He doesn't believe that, not really." Theta's voice was soft. "He's upset now, but when he stops to think, he'll know it wasn't like that."

"When he gets time to think!" Hill pivoted around to face her. "Hell! When will he have time to think? He'll be gone too before the end of the week. He can't go on fighting that heat. He can't." He stopped then, shoulders drooping.

"I'm sorry." She touched his arm. "I really am. Everything is so mixed up. Penny and Jay and Peter Paul. People like that shouldn't have to die. Only an accident kept Peter Paul from being out there. It's—it's a shame, but there wasn't room for all of them."

"No," Hill said raggedly, "there wasn't room for everyone in the Ark. But the Ark wouldn't have been needed if your father hadn't pulled the world off its orbit."

Strain lines showed around her mouth, deep lines that looked as though they'd

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been there always. "I know, Steve, I've thought about it a lot lately. There was room for all the people before father changed that, but there were other things. Crime and war and poverty and disease. You just can't measure those things."

"The right way would have been to educate the people gradually, and bring up their standard of living. No one lifetime could have accomplished it, maybe it could never have been accomplished, but even a try would have been better than this murder. Your father has set himself up as a god. That's wrong! Plenty wrong! He's got to pay for that, and he will pay for it—in hell!"

He stopped then, and pulled a deep breath into his lungs. "This part is hard to say. I love you, Theta, just like that. Maybe you've never heard of love—God knows it has no place in your father's plans. Maybe you have."

Moisture shone in her dark eyes and her lips trembled. "Steve, I—"

"Wait till I finish," he said roughly. "I'm in love with you, and we're on opposite sides of the fence. That doesn't change it. This is a fight, and the fact that you're a woman—the woman I love—doesn't change it! *I am going to kill Alpha De Spain!*"

That second of silence seemed to last forever, seemed to wrap them in longing, in bitterness, in pain. Theta didn't move. Slim and straight she stood there, the full weight of her dark glance hard upon his.

"Is—is there anything else?"

"There's this," he said and stooped to sweep her into his arms. Another year-long second while her lips were sweet under his.

"I—I'd hoped you'd do that." Tears sprang into her eyes. She twisted free and ran to the door.

Hill waited. He lighted a cigarette and twisted it to shreds in his fingers before he left the lounge.

CHAPTER XVII

THE ATTACK ON THE ARK

THE alarm came just short of midnight. The strident thunder of the speaker horns brought Hill and O'Day bolt upright in bed.

"Gun crews to surface level to repel attack! Gun crews to surface level to repel attack! All pilots to surface level at once! All pilots to surface level at once!"

Hill said, "Now what the . . . ."

The giant voice of the horns cut him short: "All hangar crews attention: Send fifteen single place fight-ships to surface level. All gun drums fully loaded, all ships equipped with rocket shells and light bombs. You have seven minutes! Hurry!"

Hill was sliding into his trousers. O'Day said, "Never mind the shirt, Steve. Come on, we've got to run."

Four elevator banks spewed hurrying men across the floor of the surface hangar. Some climbed spiral ladders near the walls, others vanished in the rear of the hangars. Tight groups slipped into the gun pits between the huge doors.

The plane elevators were working then, rising in quick succession to deposit the tiny, red-winged fighting ships. One, two, three, four, five of them were lined up on the floor already, with others coming in clock-ticking precision.

They were short-winged, huge-engined, stubby little ships with the pilot's seat far in the tail. They were sleek and deadly, like scarlet hornets waiting to stream from the nest.

O'Day grabbed Hill's arm, shouted. "Watch these ships, they're tricky as the devil. Don't open the throttle when you dive or you'll never pull out. Go way wide to stay clear of the guns on top of the hill, and for the love of Heaven come back with your drums empty!"

"I won't shoot any planes down. I won't. . . ."

Bleak fury twisted the Irishman's lips. His hand leaped up to smash open-palmed, across Hill's mouth. "You—you asked for that! Damn you, there's all the world to empty your guns at. Your job will be to look like you're fighting and get back alive. Come on!"

Hill pawed at his mouth. "Sorry, Brian."

"Act like a robot, fool! Here comes—"

O'Day never finished his sentence. A short-bodied man was in front of them, snapping words with machine-gun speed.

"O'Day, you'll go out first. Hill, you'll follow him. You'll be safe if you don't go up too fast. We're keeping this side clear of gun-fire. Move!"

O'Day sprinted away. Hill ran to the second red plane. A mechanic was waiting. Hill's foot caught the stirrup, and he was up, dropping into the cockpit. He nodded, and the mechanics shot the glass

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hood over his head, leaving him in the air-tight cockpit. There was the hiss of pumps, and the sharp air from the tanks stung his nostrils.

A bare three minutes to familiarize himself with the strange controls. Then the door was open, and he was racing his ship down the runway fan into the searchlight-lanced night.

Low over the fences, while the snarl of the motor rose, and the air-speed indicator swung up past three hundred. Almost rockets, these ships. Two minutes of that, and then away in a steep climbing bank to the right, hard on the tail of O'Day's ship.

O'Day's wing lights blinked, and he streaked east. Hill looked back and down as he followed.

The night was ablaze with moving searchlights. A red streak showed on the runway as another fighting ship leaped into the air. Then Hill saw the attacking planes.

Fifty, a hundred, two hundred of them, flying out of the east. They weren't fighting ships, but wrecks. Old transports, air-taxis, private sport jobs, wide-winged, clumsy commercial ships. Every kind, every type of plane but fighting ships. Their guns would be makeshift, they would be under-powered, slow. An armada of midgets. Cold meat for the guns of the red hornets!

The radio speaker on Hill's instrument board came crisply to life. "Calling fighting ships! Calling fighting ships! You will precede to a point out of the eastward range of our guns, and destroy attacking planes within reach. The attackers are poorly organized and poorly equipped. Ground troops are gathering near the fences but will never be able to penetrate the barriers. The anti-aircraft guns will take care of such planes as arrive over the Ark!"

THE bitter tightness came back to Hill's throat. Didn't the fools know that the Ark was unassailable? Didn't they know they were facing weapons that were the best science had produced? Didn't they . . . He cursed then, black curses that welled up from deep in his throat.

Maybe they did know, but what difference did it make? Better to go out swiftly, cleanly, in a blazing bullet-riddled ship than to wind up face down on the floor of some tent. Better this, than to die by inches. At least this was a man's way to go out!

Yes, it was that anyway, but they'd get no help from him. Any ship that crossed the gun-sights of his plane was safe.

Up ahead he saw the wicked crimson flash of O'Day's guns stab the night as he warmed them. Hill tilted the nose of his ship up, pressed the trigger switch. Gun-flame winked from the nose of his own ship. O'Day's words came back to him. "There's the world to empty your guns at!" Hill held the trigger switch down a long time.

A rocket shell burst somewhere behind them, and the darkness was ripped wide by the blue white flash. Hill glanced back as he took his ship up in a steep climb to hang on one wing. Two of the automatic anti-aircraft guns were throwing shells so fast that the muzzle gleam looked like a solid bar of light.

A moving searchlight ray pinned upon a lumbering transport, and held there. The transport was diving when a lurid finger seemed to reach out and touch it, and the transport vanished in a bright thunderclap all its own.

Hill was diving then, firing at the blank spaces between the attacking planes. He had to empty the drums, or there'd be a new face in hell for breakfast when he took the red ship back to the hangar.

He pulled the nose up, fired a short burst above a white-winged sport job. A red eye blinked up at him. The bitter grin pulled at Hill's lips. They were using a machine gun from the after cockpit. There wasn't a chance that they could hit his ship.

Hill nosed over then, passed the white ship in a screaming dive, emptied another drum at the ground. He had to wait scant seconds then before he could fire again. Wait until the automatic gear replaced the empty drums with full ones.

He looked up just in time to see a second red ship diving into the bright searchlight ray. The white-winged sport job went up and over in a tight roll to escape the red plane's guns. They were successful, just for a second, and then as the ship whipped over the wings folded. A heartbeat and the sport job was only a white blur streaking earthward.

Hill climbed again. Far to the west an unholy radiance glowed red against the night sky. Hill remembered then. The fences! The ground troops had reached the fences, and the current had been switched on!

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Up. Up. A hurtling red streak passed close, and then a second later one of the attacking planes disintegrated in a scarlet blaze.

Time and again Hill took his red ship down. Time and again he directed his fire away from the attacking planes. Then the indicator dial showed that he had but a single drum left for each gun. He dropped the bombs as he streaked low, and looked back to see the crimson flashes erupt from the barren earth behind him.

Suddenly there were only a scattered dozen of the attacking planes left. A dozen limping wrecks that tried in vain to flee before the concerted attack of the red ships.

Hill was cruising at eighteen thousand feet when the radio ordered them to return. He kept his eyes away from the outer fences. He knew, too well, what he'd see there in the reflected glow of the searchlights.

One by one, dropping swiftly to the runway, the red ships returned. Fat little hornets, Hill thought grimly, sated with the recent kill and returning to their nest.

HILL taxied his ship through the door, ruddering to the right to clear the plane in front of him. He cut the switch, and sat there lost in bitter thought until a mechanic appeared beside the ship.

His mind snapped back to the present as the hood slipped away. He was a robot, and he had to wait for an order before he could move.

O'Day came toward his ship then, walking slowly, and wiping the sweat from his face with a white scarf. He said, "Hill, return to your quarters," and waited until Hill had climbed out of his plane before he moved off toward the elevators.

Once on the lower hangar level he said, "Come on, I need a drink." He strode off to the lounge.

There were eight or ten men there—flyers all of them—grouped around a small bar. There was no spoken greeting but someone pushed a glass into Hill's hand, said, "Hill, drink this."

Hill drank, grateful for the fierce burn of the liquor in his throat. Twice his glass was refilled, and twice he drained it.

They had been there an hour when the speaker horns brought the special bulletin: "Denver, Colorado. Tonight the nation grieved at the death of President Kingston whose life since the beginning of this disaster has been one of the finest examples of courage and ceaseless devotion to his task that the history of man can record.

"The president, who for the past week had known that death was never far away, had driven himself unmercifully, and tonight his body could stand no more. Only a few thousands remain of what once was a powerful nation. All of our principal cities are gone, and death for the rest of us is only a matter of days.

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Still, this is one life we prayed would be spared until the last. We needed his great strength and unfailing courage.

"President Kingston called a secretary to his side when it became certain that he had only moments left. He dictated a statement to be read to those remaining alive. I quote: 'We can find no hope that our burden here will be lightened; no hope that even a handful of us will survive to found a new civilization. We, as a race, are doomed. I can only say this. Since we cannot live we can at least die courageously—as Americans!'"

A full-cheeked blond man slammed his glass back on the bar. "What a show! I got nine of the crates. One of 'em fell apart right under my sights."

Raw silence held the room. Silence that pressed like a giant weight. Hill's flesh crawled. O'Day's mouth was a bloodless twitching line.

The blond man jerked a thumb at the speakers. "Die like Americans. Huh! That's good stuff to feed the troops. The swine won't know what they're missin'. I wish they'd get another flight together and try to crash in here. It's fun to. . . ."

The tall man's breath exploded in a shocked curse. O'Day and Hill were moving when a short, dark-faced flyer bounded in front of the blond man.

"Lafray, you bloody louse!" he shouted.

"What do you mean?" Lafray was backing up when the short man struck. There was the dull sick sound of bone against flesh. Lafray stumbled, and the short man was on top of him swinging with both hands. Lafray's mouth vanished in a bloody smear. He went down. The short man was rushing at him, lashing out with booted feet, when O'Day caught him.

The Irishman's grip locked the short man's arms at his sides. He pulled him away from Lafray. "Easy, Dan, easy. They'll have you down in an 'A' Level lab first thing you know. They'll make a robot out of you. Let him alone, he's had enough!"

"I'll kill him."

"Easy!" O'Day growled.

Lafray scrambled to his feet and staggered out of the room.

CHAPTER XVIII

FORBES SIGNS OFF

NOT once in the following week did one of De Spain's blood-red planes streak across the runway fan. Not once did any man go above the Hangar Level, one hundred and fifty feet below the surface.

Only flying men were quartered on the Hangar Level, and they alone of the Ark's population had no assigned tasks. They drank and fought and gambled in that week. They paced the corridors like restless cats, but never were they out of hearing of the speaker horns in the lounge.

The news screens were coldly gray and silent, but De Spain had not stopped the voice of the horns on this level.

They heard the last faint announcement from New York. They heard a panting hurried voice describe a new and terrible fever that killed in five minutes. A fever that blackened the faces of its victims and choked their breath off. A fever that had spread like a raging fire through the Helena concentration camp. They listened in stiff silence to the pain-clouded voice:

"There—there are only a few of us left. We can't last long. The doctors are gone, and even they could do nothing in the face of this epidemic. We. . . ." Only low choking sounds came from the speakers, and then a grim and final silence.

Only half the flyers got to bed that night. The rest slept where they dropped, and the lounge floor was littered with empty bottles the next morning.

Four times Hill went down to the hospital. Four times he walked the shining corridors to the silver-walled lounge. The news screen was still running, and Hill spent hours watching the pictures that flashed across its surface.

He knew, and the thought ran blackly deep within him, why he had come. He knew why his heart leaped at the sight of any slim figure in the corridor. Twice each day he made that trip in the hope of seeing Theta De Spain. His mind was full of her, of the smooth curve of her cheek, of her dark eyes.

The third day she came.

He didn't hear the door open, and the first he knew she was beside him, saying in her softly lovely voice: "Hello, Steve."

"Theta!" He turned quickly, knowing at the first sight of her that the passing time had changed nothing. She was a woman, his woman, the only one he'd ever wanted. He was, in spite of everything he'd done, still in love with her. No matter what had gone before, no matter what was yet to come, he couldn't change that fact.

"I've been waiting," he said slowly. "I

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thought you'd come here before now."

"I couldn't. I—I've been trying to think this thing through. Your ideas and father's, they're all so mixed up. So different. You're both right, and you're both wrong. I—I should have told father what you planned to do, but I didn't. You. . . ." She looked away.

He put his hand under her chin, tilted her head up. "Theta. Listen to me. No matter what you do, no matter what you decide, it can't change things between you and me. You know that! You know you can't marry Bischoff!"

"Please, Steve. . . ." There was a husky timbre in her voice. "There's nothing we could do now. Nothing anyone, even father, could do for weeks yet. You've got to let me think."

He said: "I will, *darling!*"

She moved away from him then, and silence came into the room. Hill lighted a cigarette, dropped in a deep chair facing the screen. After a moment Theta curled in another chair close to his.

"You might give me one of your cigarettes."

Hill was holding his lighter for her when the screen came to life.

Jay Forbes' remembered voice flicked at Hill like a lash. "Universal Unit Two, newscasting in flight over North Dakota." The vibrant life had gone out of his voice; it was only harsh now and flat.

"We have been in the air for twenty-two hours, and during that time have flown over the battered ruins of a hundred coastal cities, and have seen the charred and blackened remains of inland towns where only a few buildings remain standing. Raging cyclones have swept nearly every square mile of the United States. Monstrous tides and sweeping tidal waves have battered and destroyed the seaport cities. And only once in this whole trip have we seen evidence of life."

Hill's cigarette smouldered, forgotten, in his hand. His eyes never left the screen.

"Only once did we see any sign of life! I guess this broadcast is for you, Steve. The only screen left will have to be in De Spain's Ark. It isn't only the United States, Steve; this hell has wiped out the rest of the world. England has been gone for a week.

"Maybe you saw the water riots they had in France, and the Orient—poor devils—they had no chance at all. There were too many of them. Disease and famine took them by the millions. Just coolies, Steve; they didn't have any right to live. They didn't have any nice cool place to hide from the sun, or any protective fences, or anti-aircraft guns. Their own possession was their lives, and they didn't have those long. They had courage, those people, and once they knew they couldn't run from death they died bravely. You should have seen that, then."

Theta De Spain whispered, "Dear God. . . ."

"I was telling you that there is life left, Steve. I mean besides Paul and me—and we're not alive, not really. This plane is carrying insulation so thick that it can barely stagger into the air, and even at that the best cooling equipment still can't keep the temperature comfortable. Men can't live at that heat Steve, but you wouldn't know. You're lucky; maybe you earned your luck." His voice climbed to a tight whisper, and stopped in a fit of coughing.

"Sorry, Steve, this's a hell of a broadcast. Yes, I was telling you about the life we found. There were four white men and a hundred negroes. You should have seen the guy who was running that camp. He was big, Steve, as big as the front end of a transport, but he was still alive, and he was still boss.

"He was telling the others that he was God. That the sun was his friend, and that he'd ordered the world destroyed so he could start a new kingdom. He got sick while he was talking. They haven't any water except what they caught in tanks, and that's rotten with fever. They've no medicine at all. You guess how long they'll last."

FLAT, lifeless, slow, the voice droned on. "I'd use the wing 'scopes and pick up a picture for you but there's nothing to see, and we're going to need the power. We've had to steal gas for weeks, maybe it's longer than that, but now we don't have that to worry about. Dead men can't object to our draining their tanks. We're going to set the ship down pretty soon. Don't go 'way; I'll be back." Forbes' cracked laughter rang loud in the room. *"May you live. . . ."*

Steven Hill's fingers sank deep in the arms of the chair. He blinked stinging moisture out of his eyes. "There's a man," he said, "a real man. They're both real men, but they'll have to stop. They can't go on."

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But they did!

Time and again Forbes' voice, each time a little weaker whispered in the speaker. Day blended into successive day. Hill ate and slept in the lounge. Theta spent most of her waking hours there. They didn't talk, they seldom took their eyes off the screen. As the days went by Forbes' voice became a rasp which shredded already frayed nerves.

He reported the torrential rains which lashed the Middle West and turned the plains into shimmering lakes. He described the flood, as the rain-gorged Mississippi left its banks and roared on a destructive path to the sea.

One broadcast covered the wave of insects which swept out of the South to die in the blazing white heat of the desert.

Occasionally they caught a glimpse of Forbes' face. A taut-skinned death's-head in which only his eyes were alive.

Days and nights that were cut from a living nightmare. Forbes told them how they found fuel, and food, and water. He whispered to them through the bitter hours while Grey tried to sleep, and once he left the iscanascope running while he slept on the cabin floor.

Then the screen showed the cave mouth of the Negro settlement, and faint words came from the speaker. "This seems to be it, Steve; this seems to be it. Fever wiped them out. Fever that struck like a lightning bolt. You tell De Spain to watch for that, or his thousands will be gone before he can turn around. T'hell with De Spain; maybe he thinks he's God, too.

"Yeah, maybe he does; other men have. Lots of them. This big negro did—remember, I told you about him? He thought he was God, and the fever took him. That's the trouble, Steve, Death is no respecter of gods, not man-made gods. They die—all of them. Maybe you ought to tell De Spain about our toast."

The image swung, faded, and Forbes' shrunken, skull-like face shone there. "This is all, Steve. There's nobody left but your select little company. Nobody that we can find. We've tried, but this's a big country. Maybe there is somebody else left, maybe. They'll die when the world goes out on the long side of its orbit. Stand by, Steve, we're takin' off!"

Again the image jumped, steadied. "Penny's gone, Steve. You remember Penny? I wonder what's on the other side. Penny's there. They beat us there, Steve, just like I'm goin' to beat you there. I'll be a foreman when you get there, remember? Maybe it's a bum joke, but what's left besides bum jokes? I—I used to damn you, Steve, I used all the names I know. I hated to think that you'd go on living when Penny had to die. It's all over now, and it doesn't make any difference. She used to laugh at me. She said I was crazy."

Forbes closed his eyes, his face was yellow and drawn.

EXPLANATION OF THE DIAGRAM ON PAGE 81

This is a reproduction of the diagram which Ben Wilson showed to Brian O'Day and Steven Hill. It shows how the eccentric genius, Alpha De Spain, planned to change the orbit of the Earth so that all living things outside the underground Ark would be destroyed by the terrific solar heat

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"It's over, Steve. The fuel tanks are nearly empty. We're sixteen thousand. . . . It's nearly over, it won't be long now till. . . ."

An aching, year-long silence. Forbes' lips moved and they had to lean close to the screen to catch the words. *"May you live forever, and I never die."*

Sweat trickled down Hill's back. His throat ached, and his breath hissed through vised teeth.

"Listen, Steve, it's—it's all right now, see? I was wrong. I got all mixed up. I hope you live for a million years; I really do, guy. I'm sorry I can't shake hands with you, Steve.

"The motors have stopped, Steve. Paul isn't trying to find a place to set her down. She's diving—diving. . . ." An odd soft brightness came into Forbes' eyes. "May—may you live. . . . Penny! Penny!"

There was a sharp click, and then nothing but gray silence. The screen was cold, dead.

Theta was crying. Deep racking sobs that shook her shoulders, were torn from deep in her throat. Hill's arm went out, and then she was leaning against him, saying in a choked voice, "He's gone."

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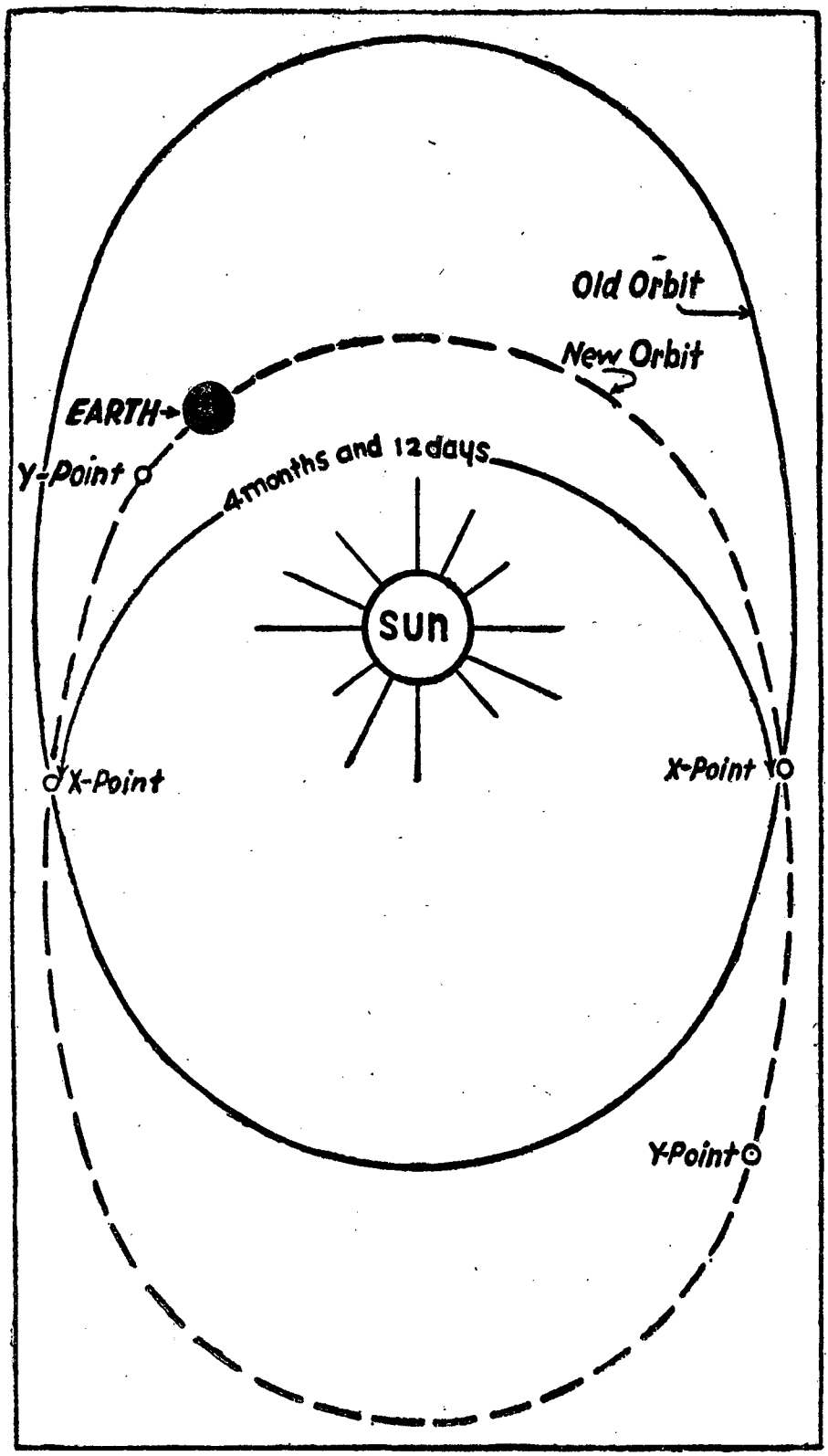

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A low word, softly spoken, "Right."

"There was nothing we could have done, Steve. Even father couldn't have changed things in time to help. We might have smuggled him in somehow—in here!"

Hill shook his head. "He wouldn't have come; you know that."

"I guess you're right," she whispered. "I guess you were right about everything." Her brimming eyes came up. "I—I might be a traitor, Steve, but I've changed sides.

"I was going to tell you so last night. One of the Twelve was robotized yesterday. Four of them are robots now! They—they disagreed with father, and he operated on them. He's—he's a machine, not. . . ."

"How about the others?"

"They argue with father more than ever."

"They're sick of killing, too. There's a chance, but we've got to plan every step. This time we can't miss!" Hill's brows V'd over eyes that were shiny with thought. "I'll get Ben Wilson on the Hangar Level some way. He knows more about what your father did to get the world off its orbit than anyone else. I'll talk to him. Then we'll plan!"

Theta De Spain nodded.

CHAPTER XIX

DEATH FROM THE SKIES

STEVEN HILL went back to the Hangar Level. There were a thousand details that had to be taken care of, a thousand questions that had to be answered before he could even begin to plan.

There had to be a way to reach "A" Level without Alpha De Spain's knowledge; a way to get a weapon past the detectors' eyes that lined the hall. Then, too, he would have to strike swiftly, before De Spain could lower the glass wall which stopped the Delta slugs as though they were made of cotton.

And there was Ben Wilson. Some way he had to reach the moon-faced mathematician. He had to be sure the world could be returned to its orbit without De Spain's help—or he had to wait.

Theta De Spain brought the answer to the first question on the seventh day. It was written on a slip of paper wrapped around a vial of the red eye-fluid she handed him as they passed in the hospital corridor.

Steven:

I can operate the elevator control so you can come down from Surface Level. Can't find way to shut off detector eyes. Father must be suspicious. Guard watching me. Don't forget to use eye-fluid. Anna was nearly caught that way yesterday.

Theta.

Hill showed the note to Brian O'Day.

Steve said, "One barrier passed. Now I've got to make a weapon that will get past the Detector Eyes."

"You're a tramp, Steve. I ought to kick your teeth in." The tinkle of ice laced the Irishman's words. "You bring this around now. Why the devil wasn't I included in this? You've got a lot of guts, you have!"

"Look," Hill said quickly, "there's no use of both of us getting mixed up in one attempt. You wait, then if I miss you can—"

"You tried to feed me that stuff before. T'hell with it. I'm in now, and I'm stayin' in. When the time comes to crack 'A' Level I'll flip a coin with you. The winner can kill De Spain—or die tryin'!"

"Right."

"You knew how I felt. You saw those jitney planes try to crack this place when they knew they didn't have a chance. All a man can do is die anyway. Those guys knew it, and they kept comin'. I ought to be able to do that much."

"Now, what about a weapon?"

O'Day's eyes were bright with thought. "Wait a minute, Steve. There are four thousand people in the Ark. They didn't have anything to do with the murder of those other poor devils any more than we did. We've got to be sure we're not messin' up their chance to get out of this alive.

"I'll talk to Ben Wilson first. De Spain's got to die. He's got to pay for what he's done, and for what he's trying to do, but a day or a week makes no difference now. We've got to be sure the world can be returned to its orbit without him. Ben will know."

"I'd figured on that," Hill said, "but De Spain is robotizing the Twelve, one at a time, and the sooner we get. . . ."

"Right." O'Day got to his feet. "I'll see Ben now. And you better be damn careful that your robot act doesn't slip. Borsi's back on this level. He was transferred here this morning. He's as deadly as a coral snake. Watch him!"

Hill said, "I will."

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O'Day was back in an hour. "He's not sure yet. There's one or two things he's got to know first. He said to come back in a week."

"A week!"

"Yeah, and we'll be flyin' again before then. The peak of the heat is behind us. Another month and it'll be about like it used to be in the Fall. There'll be about two weeks of that weather according to Ben, and then the world swings way out, and the temperature drops to a hundred below zero."

"A week," Hill protested. "That's a long time."

"We've got time—a year if we need it—but we've got to be sure. Your job is to watch Borsi. He's suspicious as hell."

THE flight orders came four days later. "Attention, pilots!" the horns roared. "Report to Surface Level at dawn tomorrow for observation flights. Individual orders and territory assignments will be given you there."

The flight chief called the pilots into his office as fast as they left the elevators. "We've mounted speaker horns under the wings of the planes," he said tersely. "There's an automatic turntable and record in the cabin of each plane. You will cover the territory assigned to you with the speakers running all the time you are in the air. The horns will direct anyone still alive to spread a square of white where it will be visible."

The lean, dark-faced Borsi shrugged his jacket tight across his shoulders. "Don't tell me De Spain's going soft."

"No," the flight chief said dully, "he isn't. Each ship carries fifteen bombs of Upsilon gas. You are to drop those on each white square that appears." He kept his eyes on the desk. "Your territory assignments are in the planes. Two men to each ship. Take off at once."

Bitter anger churned in Hill's mind as he followed O'Day to the big red-winged bombing plane. Upsilon gas! One lungful of the greenish vapor would kill instantly! And no mask had ever been devised which would withstand it.

This was butchery!

They were at the plane then, and O'Day was cursing the mechanic who scrambled away from the controls. The big Irishman's mouth was twitching, and his eyes were smoky with anger. He dropped in the seat. He trampled on the brake, gunned the right wing motor, and brought the ship around savagely.

"The louse," he said raggedly. "The dirty murderin' louse!"

The bomber roared out of the hangar, the runway dropping smoothly away from the wheels. Hill picked up the landing gear, and the red ship sliced east into the sunrise.

O'Day turned, his face a bleak mask. "The first thing we do is get rid of those bombs. If that three-tailed son of a wolf thinks I'm going to. . . ." Rage choked off his words.

"We'd better wait," Hill said grimly. "Maybe we won't find anybody. Jay Forbes couldn't, and God knows he tried. De Spain'd ask questions if we were the only crew that dropped our eggs."

O'Day's bitter laughter ran through the cabin. "And that's the way you use your head. Listen, why do you think De Spain sent us out? For a ride maybe, or to use up fuel? No, the louse has had the radio men listening day and night. They've heard messages and used a direction finder on them. That's why he knew just where to send us. The ten planes he sent out couldn't cover the whole continent in a month, and do a good job.

"He doesn't care about the rest of the world, but if anyone here found his headquarters they might try to crash in. He doesn't want that again—he knows the people in the Ark would revolt! So he sends us to take care of them, and he sends us to a certain spot. *He knows there are still people alive!*"

Hill swore in sharp amazement. "You're right!" He slid out of his seat. "I'll drop the eggs any time that you say the word."

"Wait!" O'Day took a short wrench out of his pocket. "Use this on the camera. The flight chief's getting plenty sick of this himself. He might turn us in, but not unless De Spain demands the film."

"I've got a better idea. Take the ship up to ten thousand, and wait till we turn up a patch of white rock. Then the film will look right."

O'Day's nod was his only answer.

Ten minutes later Hill tripped the levers and watched the sleek-bellied bearers of death streak downward. He smiled then, for the first time in weeks, as though a heavy load had dropped off his shoulders and gone with them, hurtling down through the hot white sunlight.

East into the heat, while the thermometer on the instrument board crept up and up. A pattern of desolation swept back under the wings. Smouldering ruins

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that had been towns, the wreckage strewn path of a tornado, a still blazing forest fire, and the gutted course of a long dried flood.

At six a. m. O'Day nosed the ship down. "We're here," he said. "We'll use the auto-pilot and cruise at two thousand." His mouth was white-lipped, strained. "Switch on the horns. You use your glasses on that side, I'll watch this."

"Right."

Half throttle. Back and fourth across a rugged and barren wasteland. Sweat ran into Hill's eyes and stung there. The fieldglasses grew warm and slippery in his grasp. The monotonous roaring of the horns made speech impossible; dinned at Hill's ears until it seemed that the words had been graven forever on his mind.

"Calling all Americans! Calling all Americans! Food, water, and medical aid can be had by signaling this plane. Place square of white on ground near your refuge. Calling all Americans!"

De Spain's invitation to death!

THE heat in the plane cabin increased with each passing hour. Hill's throat was dry, his mouth seemed stuffed with cotton. Once he tried to smoke, and then ground the cigarette to shreds under his heel when he found it took his eyes away from the glasses.

One hour. Two. Three. They might have been flying over the face of some long-dead planet. There was no movement anywhere on the sun-blistered barrenness beneath them.

On and on while the ache in Hill's throat grew, and the giant's voice bellowed unheeded promises to the ghosts of a vanished race.

"Steve!" O'Day grabbed at Hill's arm, his fingers bit clear to the bone. "Steve, look!"

Hill swung around. The focus wheel slipped under his fingers, and sweat blurred the lenses. Then the flicker of white showed against the drab gray of a distant hill.

"Do you see it?" O'Day shouted.

Hill's stabbing hand hit the speaker switch, and the roaring died. He stared at O'Day. "It might be," he whispered. "It might. . . ."

O'Day nodded. The silence grew until it hurt their ears.

Hill had his glasses up again. He was afraid to think, afraid even to pray. The chance was slim, too slim. It might be a rock. No! It moved, blessed God, it moved!

O'Day kicked the automatic pilot off, the motor snarl deepened and the bomber banked tightly. He didn't speak. There was no need. They had both known, since the beginning, that no power on earth could keep them from landing if a signal appeared.

Down. Low over that square of white where the sight of two upturned faces started Hill shouting senselessly. "We're coming! We're coming!" He went on shouting. He knew they couldn't hear but the words felt good in his throat.

Both men were looking down as the bomber flicked across the tiny broken plateau. On, across the ragged canyon, and then back in a slow, sweeping bank.

Muscles worked along O'Day's jaw, and his eyes glinted like bits of some dark stone. "Tough, Steve, it'll be tough. Watch the wing flaps, and get on the brake as soon as we touch."

"Not too soon," Hill said, "she'll go over on her nose!"

"You wouldn't be trying to tell me not to go in?"

"You're goin' in," Hill snarled, "if you scatter this crate from hell to breakfast."

"Right!" A wintery grin tugged at O'Day's mouth.

Down then, through the hot bright glare of the sun. Down. O'Day stalled to loose flying speed as the tiny plateau came up to meet them. The wing flaps cut their speed, but not enough. No word was spoken. There wasn't time and each man knew his job.

All of O'Day's matchless skill at the controls came into play, and all of Hill's. Then the ground was a gray stream on either side, and the plateau rim leaped, at breathless speed, toward them.

The wheels slammed hard against the ground. The brakes took hold. The tail rose, and slammed back to earth. O'Day swung the plane, and stopped just short of the rim.

"Nice goin', guy!" Hill stood up. "What're we goin' to tell them—not the truth; we can't do that. And we can't help much; we haven't got the supplies. We'll be building false hopes."

"We'll do what we can," O'Day said harshly. "The future will have to wait." He ripped the first-aid case from the wall. "Come on."

"They'll need pure water," Hill said. "And food. We've got a little."

"Bring it."

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The furnacelike heat started sweat from every pore as they dropped to the ground. A hundred feet away a man stumbled toward them.

O'Day shouted, "Stay there. Don't try to run. We're comin'!"

Moving through the strength-sapping heat was almost like swimming, Hill thought as he tried to run. How could anyone live through days on end of this?

The man who waited was tall, and once he had been big, but now he was a walking skeleton. His clothes hung from bony shoulders, his hands were claws, his wrists only pipestems. He was swaying. His legs folded, just as the others reached his side, and he fell forward into O'Day's arms.

"Steady, man!" O'Day lowered him gently to the ground, knelt. "Water!" he snapped at Hill.

The man's face was thin-cheeked, blackened, and the sun-blisters overlaid one another. He gulped greedily at the water, and after a long moment smiled with his eyes.

"Just in time," he whispered. "Just in time. I was afraid you'd miss us."

"Where'd you come from?" O'Day asked. "I mean where've you been living during this heat?"

"In a mine. Shaft's over there, by white square. There's others below."

"How many?"

"I—I don't. . . ." The tall man closed his eyes.

O'Day said, "Never mind, old-timer." He picked the tall man up, and strode away toward the white square. Hill followed with the bundles.

A RICKETY ladder took them down, down, a hundred feet or more into the earth. It was cooler there, but the musty air was long dead, and they were gasping for breath long before they reached the pale flicker of light on the landing stage.

The weird light showed the worn features, the lifeless eyes of a second man. "I come on ahead." He tried to smile. "The others were waiting to know."

"Sure," Hill said harshly, "sure, they'd want to know when help got here." He stepped forward. "Just get your arm around my shoulder. That's right; now where do we go?"

"This way."

Hill got an electric torch out of his pocket and its probing sword-bright ray showed blackened rock, crumbling pillars, and a dirt floor worn smooth by the passage of many feet. Three hundred feet along that, and they came into a huge, high-domed cavern. Crude bunks lined the walls. Rustling, ghostly sound greeted them. A dozen white, strained faces showed in the light's reflected glow, but no one moved.

The man beside Hill said, "Corrigan's over here."

A moment later the light picked out a big-boned, shadow-thin man who was propped upright on a straw-filled bunk. Dark, glazed eyes looked out at them from a strong-jawed, bearded face.

"You've come." His voice was as old as pain itself. "We prayed that someone would. We couldn't have lasted much longer. The air-conditioning unit hasn't run for a week; our air pump broke down two days ago, and can't be fixed. We've no lights, and only enough power to run the radio."

"Easy, man, there's no hurry." Hill bent over him. "Here's water; we've plenty of time to listen."

Corrigan's lips pressed tightly shut. "The others," he muttered. "They need it more than I do. Give it to them first."

O'Day asked, "How many are there here?"

"There were nearly a thousand once, now possibly a third of those remain. The—the children—the heat took them first."

Neither Hill nor O'Day spoke. The rustling voice went on. "You look like you've come through all right. Can—can you spare food? Ours spoiled. We need medical supplies. Our—our doctor died two weeks ago."

"Sure," Hill promised harshly, "we'll have supplies here in a hurry. One or two days. Hell, man, the worst is over. You'll be back on your feet before you know it."

The glassy eyes clung to Hill's face. "You wouldn't lie to me, son?"

O'Day said: "We'll check to see what you'll need, and how many of you there are. Then we'll make a rush trip. Take it easy, old-timer; your worries are over."

They turned away. An hour, then, while the electric torches lanced the oven-hot cavern; while Hill's throat tightened, and moisture stung in his eyes.

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Heads moved in the light, and feverishly bright eyes shone. Husky, pain-clouded, whispering voices asked anxiously:

"You will be back? You will come back soon?"

Slowly the count grew. A hundred, a hundred and ten, twenty, thirty. They had reached two hundred and eighty-six when the torch ray swept down the corridor to the radio room.

"Hi!" A man turned. Tight-skinned, yellowish, his face was more death's-head than human. "You wouldn't have a spare cigarette?"

"Sure, here." Hill fumbled at his case, spilled its contents on the table. "Here, take 'em all; I can get more."

"Thanks." The man leaned over his radio set. "I been tryin' to reach that other bunch, south of here a thousand miles, but I can't raise 'em. They were talkin', tellin' me that a plane'd just got there, when they quit. Funny, I been tryin' ever since, but there's not a whisper."

O'Day pulled Hill back into the corridor. "We'll be back as soon as we can," he told the radioman, and then ran for the ladder.

THE Irishman didn't speak again until they had reached the plane, until the air-pumps had lowered the blazing temperature.

"That's Dan Zoo's section south of us. He's got Lafray in his plane. Remember? Dan tried to kick Lafray's teeth out after that fight over the Ark, the night the jitney army tried to crash in."

"Yes."

"Dan's all right, we know that, but Lafray's a louse. We've got to get this crate into the air before they come this way and spot us."

The motors caught, roared. Hill released the brakes and the ship rumbled over the broken ground. The tail came up, and O'Day held the ship on the ground till the cliff-edge raced under the wheels. They dropped, sickeningly, very close to the ground. Then they were banking, climbing.

"Now what?" Hill asked. "We found them, and we made promises. They'll be waitin' for food and medicine."

"This changes things," O'Day said bleakly. "Before we found these people we had all the time in the world. Now we haven't got any. Every day we lose means some of them will die. We can't wait!"

Hill said, "No, we can't, we've got to kill De Spain now! Even if. . . ."

"Even if this cockeyed world never gets back on its orbit. Those people have as much right to live as we have, and they're goin' to get it!"

"How will we. . . ."

"That," O'Day said flatly, "is something we've got to figure out tonight. I'll get Doc Barclay to call you and me down to the hospital. We'll get Ben Wilson there, and—and Theta. We've got to move fast. The people outside the Ark can't live through another month, and God knows the winter would wipe them out like flies. We've got to move, and move fast!"

Hill said, "Right!"

They were twenty minutes away from the Ark when Hill's sharp eyes picked out the fleck of red high above them. He called it to O'Day's attention.

"That'll be Dan and Lafray," the Irishman said. "But why's he so damn high? Dan doesn't like to waste time coming in to land."

"Are you sure it's Dan?"

"Has to be. His is the only ship that went east besides ours."

Hill dropped into a thoughtful silence. He kept his eyes on Dan's plane.

The plane above led the way to the Ark. They were close; the white sheen of the runway fan glimmered below them, when Dan's plane tilted on one wing and then dove. Down, slicing through the hot glare of the sun, while a stiff curse pushed through Hill's lips.

O'Day was staring, his fingers white on the control wheel. "Dan!" he barked. "Pull out! Pull out!"

The bomber was a glittering red meteor now. They could hear the thunderous, bellowing howl of its motor; the scream of wind past the wing struts.

That second seemed to stretch into an aeon of time. Hill's aching eyes followed that hurtling ship. His breath exploded into a sobbed curse, and then the red ship struck!

Instantly, the purple-bright fan of flame blazed there. Seconds later, hollowly, the noise of the crash reached them. O'Day was diving when the explosion came. The wreck seemed to disintegrate, to vanish in a scarlet flash.

"The fuel tanks!" Hill snapped. "The fire got to the fuel!"

O'Day was banking. "Sure, but Dan didn't know that, neither did Lafray. I was afraid of this, afraid of it when Lafray was assigned as Dan's bomber. La-

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fray was too cold-blooded, and he liked to kill. He'd bomb any signal—with pleasure! He did. Dan couldn't take it any more, but he wasn't going to leave Lafray behind to kill again. No—he took that butcher on a one-way ride."

"Yeah. One way is right. He stacked that ship right in front of the hangar doors."

The wheels touched, and O'Day taxied the bomber around the still blazing pile of wreckage, and into the gloom of the hangar.

A white-faced mechanic was waiting when they climbed down. "Did you see that? Hell, he'd 'a' blown the whole joint up if we hadn't heard him comin' an got the doors closed. If that fire'd ever reached the fuel tanks here it'd 'a' been too bad."

O'Day said, "That's right."

"Yeah," the mechanic growled, "an' now we got to clean up the mess. We got to go out in that sun an'—"

O'Day's big hand shot out, caught the mechanic's shirt just at his throat. "Listen, rat!" O'Day's eyes held the hot sheen of gun steel, his voice was soft, deadly. "Be careful what you say; be careful what you do! And treat that wreckage with reverence—a gentleman died there!"

The mechanic scooted away from O'Day's relaxing grasp. "They was two of 'em in that ship. They was—"

"Right! One gentleman, and one rat!"

CHAPTER XX

CONSPIRACY

THERE were three men in the room—Steven Hill, John Barclay, and Ben Wilson—when Theta De Spain slipped through the door. Her dark eyes were wide, her voice a bare whisper.

"A guard followed me from 'A' Level. I think I lost him, but I'm not sure."

Hill said, "Sit down, Theta, it'll be all right."

"But—"

"Brian O'Day's out there. He was afraid something like this might happen."

"Yes." Barclay grinned briefly. "Hill wanted to go but we were afraid a robot in the corridor might give the show away. You don't have to worry, Theta, I've never seen a guard Brian couldn't handle."

"Oh!"

The door snapped back then, and Brian O'Day strode into the room. "Let's get on with it," he said. "The guard's sleeping in a closet. He never saw what hit him."

Ben Wilson's eyes glimmered behind thick glasses. "Over here at the table, please. I've got to have room for this drawing."

Silently, they grouped around him. Wilson slipped a thin roll of paper out of his sleeve, spread it on the table. "Here," he said, "take a look at this. You'll see the sun there, and the two orbits of the earth—the old and the new. Now: The scale of this map is distorted of course but the earth is marked in about the position it now occupies on the new orbit. Then there are two X-points marked where the two orbits intersect. Got that?"

A murmuring assent was his answer.

"Right. Now the Y-point on the old orbit—that's the solid line—is the place where De Spain started his dynamos. It took just about a month for the earth to reach the X-point where it left the old orbit.

"You see, here"—his finger traced the new orbit—"is the second Y-point, just a few days ahead of the earth's present position. The dynamos must be slowed when the earth reached that point—or they must not be touched for eight months while the earth completes its course around the new orbit to a place opposite where the dynamos were started. Do you follow me?"

O'Day asked: "How about the difference in time?"

"It's marked there. On the old orbit it took six months between X-points; on the short side of the new orbit it takes four months and twelve days." Wilson frowned, pulled at his lower lip. "That's why I told you I wanted another week. I haven't had time to check the figures on that yet."

"How much time is left?" Hill looked up to ask. "I mean until the earth reaches the X-point on the new orbit?"

"Exactly four days, twelve hours, and sixteen minutes."

"Call it four days," O'Day ground out. "You'll need the rest of the time to dope out the controls. You can leave now, Ben; we'll take care of the rest of this."

"Right." The moon-faced mathematician blinked. "I'll leave you that map. It's crude, and I don't need it. I'll finish my calculations."

None of them spoke until after the door had closed behind Wilson. Then O'Day said: "He's too precious to risk in the battle. We'll need him to run the

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controls, and we'll need him whole. The rest of us don't matter."

Barclay's elbows were propped on the table, his chin cupped in his hands. "Now what?"

"This." O'Day's eyes flicked to the girls. "You can operate the elevator so that one or more of us can come down from the Surface Level to 'A' Level?"

"Right. But I can't find the way to shut off the Detector Eyes."

"Then we're exactly where we were," Hill said.

"Not quite. Before, we had time, and now we haven't. Before, we weren't sure about putting the world back on its orbit; now we are. Before, a failure didn't mean much except our own lives. Now it does."

"If I could get past the guards," Hill whispered, "I wouldn't need any weapon but my bare hands."

O'Day snapped, "Fool! I've thought of that, but it won't work."

"No, Steve." It was Theta. "Father has a gun within reach all the time."

"Then that's out."

"That's only part of it. Borsi's in charge of the armory now. There's no way in the world to get even a gun which would sound the alarms. No way to get any kind of a gun."

"Listen," Barclay said, "I've got an idea."

Three attentive faces swung his way.

"Why not some other kind of a weapon? A bow and arrow, tipped with a surgeon's scalpel?"

Theta shook her head. "The eyes work on any Omicron metal, and the scalpel blade is of Omicron."

"There's only one other way," O'Day said, "and it requires at least one gun. Like this. Two of us will ride the elevator down to 'A' Level. I'll run down the hall with a hunk of metal—any kind—and the alarm will sound. The guards will catch me. De Spain will come out when he hears that I had no weapon. The other man can be waiting at the end of the hall with the gun. At that distance he couldn't miss."

Hill asked: "Why not just one man to wait?"

"Uh-huh, it'll take excitement to make the guards overlook the man who was waiting. Without it you'd be trapped in a hurry."

"Right." Hill nodded agreement. "It's a deal, but I go first."

Barclay got to his feet. "This isn't doing anything for the poor devils who are waiting for medical aid. I've got some ideas along that line I want to work out. See you at dawn tomorrow."

The big Irishman frowned, said, "Wait, Johnny, I'll go with you."

A moment, and Hill and Theta were alone in the room. He leaned across the table. "Theta, can you smuggle me into a lab for a couple of hours? I've got an idea, too."

She said: "I can try."

THE hot cone of white light spilled down on the cluttered work bench. The wall light—that queer, soft radiance which emanated from the walls themselves—was off. The white brightness of the drop light struck down, shadowed Hill's face. He talked as he worked.

"Look, Theta, those eyes are impulse eyes. They're invisible rays which react on metal, probably on the omicron element since it's the only element present in all metal. Now: If there was a way to shield a gun, a way to deflect the rays around it so the contact wouldn't be broken, we'd have it fixed."

"That's right, but . . . . "

"There must be a way."

"Maybe I can help. We'll need insulation, and a shield of some kind. How about one of those Borson plates?"

"Might work, but first we'll have to rig a Detector Eye here so we can test it."

"Right."

The night hours slipped away as they worked side by side. Two, three, a dozen times they painfully constructed something they thought would work, only to have it fail in the test. It was nearly dawn when Hill turned from the work bench with a square box six inches deep.

"We've got it," he grinned. "It works. You saw it work. Of course we had scraps of metal, but a gun would be just the same. Now all we need is the gun. We'll get that some way, and then. . . ."

"Then," she said huskily, "then it's over."

He turned, brows V-ing. "What do you mean?"

Her eyes were misty, fathomless, and darker, much darker, then he'd remembered. He was conscious suddenly of her nearness, her poise, her beauty.

"This." She touched the box in his hands. "I helped you make that. I helped you to find a way to kill my father."

Her lips were white, but her words drove on, low and cold.

"Judas had nothing on me. He betrayed

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his God, and I betrayed mine. My father is a wonderful man, and his mind is the greatest the world has ever known. Sometimes I think he sees only figures and formulas instead of people. Only perfection could ever satisfy him, and perfection is not a human trait. He thinks I am close to perfect—and yet I arrange his death. *I help to kill my father!"*

The box slipped out of Hill's fingers, crashed to the floor. Hill said, "Theta, you. . . ."

"Let me finish. You, and the rest of them, here and scattered in dying groups throughout the world, are right. But my father is right, too. He lives in one world, a world of pure reason, and you live in another, a flesh and blood world. You and the others have a right to live. And so Alpha De Spain must die! No, wait, I'm not trying to justify myself. I've thought this all out."

Steven Hill waited.

"You want nothing but to live, and to work out your destinies in your way. That, forever, should be man's right. That is the error in father's calculations. Men and women do not fit into formulas. They live, love, bear children, work, and die regardless of rules. Some lead—you are like that, Steve—and some follow, but men and women must always be allowed to think, to do things for the weak. That's life, and father tried to rearrange it. It didn't work."

Her lips twitched. "I can see both sides, Steve. I'm the only one in the world who can. Father could never retain his control over the members in the Ark. They would remember, too plainly, that he had killed the human race and sooner or later he would have to fall. Better now, while there's still a chance of saving the others, than later."

"But what. . . ."

She drew herself up, slim and straight. "I, too, am a De Spain. His blood is my blood. I am his child. If he can't live, then I can't live."

He caught her shoulders roughly. "Theta, listen to me! You've got nothing to do with this, nothing at all. You'll open the elevator—no, we'll find another way!"

"You mean it, Steve." Her smile was ageless, tender. "You child, did you think that I could live with you after we two had planned a murder? Can't you see how that would grow into something bigger than either of us? Can't you see?"

He said, "Foolish girl," and kissed her. She was motionless in his arms, a passive motionlessness, and her lips were cold. She waited until he raised his head, and then twisted out of his grasp. She spoke from near the door:

"We have three days left. The second evening, at seven thirty-one, the elevator will be at the surface for you. That gives you nearly two days to find a gun. Good-bye, Steven! *May you live forever—"*

"Wait, Theta!"

"You can't come out in the corridor now. Your eyes are white again. You must use the fluid. If anyone saw you that way your plan would be ruined."

"Damn the plan!" He leaped for the door, but it snicked shut in his face, and by the time he opened it she was nowhere in sight.

CHAPTER XXI

THE DEAD METROPOLIS

THREE-THIRTY a.m. Bellowing speaker horns. Yawning, half-awake men. Coffee that scalded the lips. Packed elevators, rocketing upward. Blood-red wings gleaming in the half light of the hangar. The silver discs of spinning propellers; the throaty *whrrrruummpphh—whrrruummph* of idling motors.

Dawn flight!

O'Day threw Hill a stiff smile as they crowded into the Flight Chief's office. Hill hadn't time to wonder about that before the Flight Chief began to talk.

"Five bombers, five pursuit ships today. Hill, Gregory, Vach, Ames, O'Hern, you fly pursuit jobs. Barclay, you'll act as O'Day's bomber. Assignments are aboard your ships. Move!"

Barclay! Hill caught sight of the doctor's lean face as he moved with the crowd. What was he doing here? Why. . .

Then O'Day's taut voice drilled in his ear. "We've got the ship packed with medical supplies. Doc and I worked most of the night. You were asleep when I came in, and I didn't want to wake you. Doc put most of the flyers on the sick list so he'd have to go out. We're goin' back to that mine."

"Right!" Hill whispered. "Listen, I've found the way to get the gun inside De Spain's quarters without sounding the alarms."

"Good! Be sure there's no plane close to you, and then follow us to the mine!"

"Right."

Hill climbed slowly into the cockpit,

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waited till the hood was in place, and then trailed a lumbering bomber out into the first pale light of the dawn. Up and up, then, with the motor snarling, and the world fading beneath layers of silver mist.

He arrived ten minutes before O'Day's ship did, but waited until the bomber was on the ground before he took his ship in.

O'Day said: "Thanks for waiting. I need all the damn room there is here." He shoved a heavy box into the door of the plane. "Here, we're the packhorses. Doc's got plenty of work to do down below."

They were two hours unloading the plane, and lowering the boxes to the shaky platform a hundred feet underground. And another thirty minutes slipped away while they carried the boxes into the main cavern.

John Barclay was there. They saw his lean face, dark against the torchlight, over the makeshift table he had fixed up. He called them as they made the last trip.

"Gauze," he snapped, "lots of it, and a scalpel, and the serum."

They watched him then, watched the glittering instruments in his deft hands. They gave what help they could, finding the things he needed, and opening ampules of fever serum. Once he smiled at Hill as the hypodermic syringe sucked the green serum up into its tube, but for the most part his face was set and grim.

His face was still serious when he joined them in the scant shade of the plane. "It won't work, Brian," he said. "I can't do it that way. I thought I could do what was needed in time to go back with you. I can't! I've got to stay!"

"As bad as that?" the Irishman asked.

"Worse. These people need all the attention I can give them. They need serum, and care, and good food. I'm sorry, Brian, I've got to stay."

O'Day nodded. "You know what that means?"

"Yes." The bitter grin pulled at Barclay's lips. "It means that within a week we'll all be moving into the Ark, or we won't. I'm taking a swell chance of queering any chance at De Spain, and I'm putting your neck in a noose. But I'm a doctor, and these people need me. Sorry."

"Right, sucker." O'Day thrust out his hand. "Let us worry about that."

Barclay went back to the mine shaft, and O'Day turned to Hill. "We still need that gun, Steve. I asked Corrigan, and he said there wasn't one here. That leaves us in the same hole, but listen. If there's one any place there should be one in New York City, and . . . ."

"I got it. I can set the pursuit job down in the street there, if I can't find a roof." He was already moving. "I'll get one if I have to tear New York City apart."

"You mean what's left of New York City."

The pursuit ship's motor caught when he pressed the switch, and the wheels were smacking over the broken ground. The tiny plane seemed to step up into the air.

He slanted the ship down when he was still ten minutes out of New York. His heart caught in his throat at the sight of the ragged skyline. Some of the towers were still there—silver and gleaming in the sun—but others were gone. He could see the strewn wreckage that had been the elevated highways, the moving sidewalks, the cross-building ramps. The Universal Newscasting landing field was gone.

Two hundred miles an hour winds, terrific heat, battering storms, tidal waves, and the unfigured upon expansion of metal had already begun their work.

Nowhere on the harbor line was there a dock remaining. The sea had claimed those, and gone far inland to batter the buildings there. The Battery, the Village, were only smashed and drifted heaps of rubble.

No ship floated on the harbor, no plume of smoke showed anywhere on the skyline. There wasn't a sign of any life.

HILL'S memory leaped back over scant months to the day when he and Forbes had first landed on the Universal roof. The sky had been alive with planes, glittering paths of color moving on their assigned levels. There had been life and color and noise—thunderous noise. The ramps and highways had been packed, and the noise of the auto horns had reached them even on the roof.

These were gone now, as completely as though they'd never existed. The tiny red ship swooped down a narrow walled canyon between the buildings. No, there was still a trace. A wrecked transport lay in the street below, And something that could have been only whitening bones shone against the dark pavement.

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Back and forth over wreckage-littered streets Hill took the red ship in a frantic search for a place to land. A place close to an arms shop he remembered on West Twelfth Street.

He found one, finally, a block-long piece of the lower Broadway elevated roadway which was intact and free of wreckage. He put the ship down there, put it down in a sweeping rush that took him dangerously close to a building face.

Hill's flesh was crawling, his face a twitching mask when he dropped to the roadway. The utter quiet flayed his nerves. He threw back his head and shouted then, shouted till his throat was raw.

"Hello-o-o! Hell-o-o-o-o!"

An echo mocked him hollowly.

"Alone," he said in a tight, breathless voice, "alone in a city of the dead. God!"

Even the sound of his boot heels on the pavement was a welcome noise. His eyes kept moving constantly, searching for some flicker of motion, some sign of life. He had covered two blocks when the roaring sound knotted his stomach muscles, brought him whirling around.

Lazy spirals of dust rose from the center of the roadway, and a new pile of wreckage lay there. The cornice had dropped off the building he had just passed.

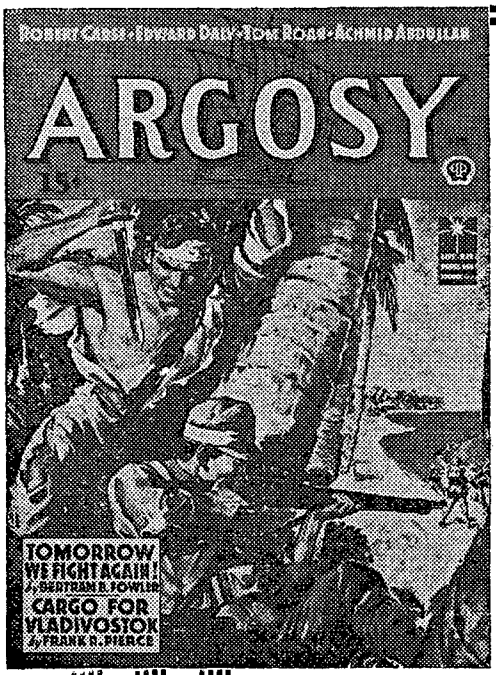
He found bodies when he left the ramp. He knotted a handkerchief across his mouth and nose, and hurried on.

The windows on the lower levels were smashed, and the doors of the shops hung open. Walking was difficult. Twice he had to climb over mountains of wreckage, and a dozen times he walked around the dead.

Unease grew in Hill's mind as he hurried the last hundred feet to the arms shop. Unease that changed to bitter sureness as he strode through the door. The shop was bare!

Hill stared at the smashed showcases and barren shelves and then began, desperately, to search. He pawed through twenty or thirty drawers before he found the fifty-shot clip for a Delta gun. There was nothing else in the shop.

He shouldered his way back into the stockrooms, and there, in a velvet lined case, he found the gun. A queer, old-fashioned gun, with a pearl grip and a squarish barrel. There were two clips there, too, mounted on the velvet, and loaded with big, dull-nosed bullets. He



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smashed the case, and lifted the gun out. He saw the printed card then. It read:

.45 Automatic, Army Issue
Model of 1944

The bitter grin came back to Hill's lips. 1944! It might as well have come from Noah's time. They'd used gunpowder in those days, and fat lead bullets. The powder had probably lost its life long since. He stood there, grim-mouthed, and then shrugged. He might as well try it; there was nothing to lose.

He fed a clip into the butt of the gun, pulled the trigger. Nothing happened. He frowned. Huh, this gadget didn't even click. Now if . . . . A couple of minutes later he'd discovered how to jump a shell into the chamber. This time he pointed the gun casually at a statue in the corner, fingered the trigger. He wondered, later, what he'd expected. A faint *pop* like that of a Delta gun, perhaps, but nothing like the roaring hell that broke loose in his hand.

HILL had nearly reached the ramp when his eyes caught the glimmer of steel close to a body crumpled at the base of a building. Distaste flattened his lips as he stepped close. A gun, yes, a fifty shot Delta gun, but. . . .

"Sorry, guy, but I need this."

The rising wind was the only warning, and he didn't notice that until he'd climbed the broken stairway to the elevated highway. Then it struck full in his face like the hot breath of a blast furnace. His eyes raked the sky. Yellow-bronze, nothing to fear, and yet. . . .

Tides!

Hill ran. He knew them. Too many times he'd seen the unbelievable wall of water racing through a coastal city. Too many times on the news screens he'd seen the tidal waves that came with a wind and sky exactly like these.

One block, two. The plane was still three hundred yards distant when he saw the water; saw the foaming breaker smash high over the roadway, send a sheet of green water toward him.

Then his foot was ramping on the plane step, and he was heaving himself up, dropping into the cockpit. He shot one glance back over his shoulder as he fumbled for the starter switch. A glance that brought icy fingers to knot his stomach.

The tidal wave! Big—great God how high—it reared like some monster twenty, thirty, forty feet above the surface of the roadway, and rushed toward him.

He hardly knew when the motor caught; he couldn't take his eyes off that awesome greenness. His foot stabbed automatically at the brake release, and the tiny ship was moving. It seemed forever before the tail came up, forever before the green wall dropped behind.

The reaction hit him fifteen minutes out of New York. He'd set the auto-pilot then, but his jerking hands couldn't get a cigarette between his lips. Death had ridden in the cockpit at his side.

A drink helped. The bottle clicked against his teeth, but the hot burn of the liquor in his throat seemed to loosen his taut muscles. After a little he got the two guns out of his pockets. He'd be lucky to get one past the guards, let alone two. In the end he carefully slit the seat cushion, and stuffed the .45 and the extra clip under the padding.

Hill was glad, at last, to feel the runway under his wheels, to taxi into the warm gloom of the hangar, and to wait until a mechanic said:

"Hill, return to your quarters!"

Slowly, mechanically, he climbed out of the plane, moved stiffly across the wide floor. His face had donned its robot's mask.

The lean-faced Borsi passed him near the elevator, and for just a second his eyes clung to Hill's expressionless face. A warning smouldered in Hill's mind.

CHAPTER XXII

INTO THE TRAP

THAT warning stayed with Steven Hill all the way down the shining corridor to his room. Once inside he crossed, immediately, to the wall mirror. And then he knew the reason for Borsi's puzzled glance. *The pupils of his eyes were nearly white!*

He stood there a long time staring in wonder. What the devil? Was the red eye-fluid failing him? Was it losing its strength? He had used it last in the plane after leaving New York. Three—no, it was nearly five hours ago. Hill sighed in relief as he fumbled for the vial he carried taped under his arm.

It had been his fault, not the fluid's. He'd better watch the time more closely if he didn't want to be back on an operating table on "A" Level. A guard would only have to get one good look at his

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eyes without the saving fluid in them.

This time it would be De Spain who would operate. Twice! Once on Hill, and once on Anna Overbeck.

"Hill! Hill!"

The tight voice came from the doorway, brought Hill whirling to face Hank Gregory. The tall flyer was panting, and a whiteness showed through the darker cast of his skin. "Hill! They took O'Day to 'A' Level!"

Hill stood there for just a second. This could be a trap! They could have sent Gregory to trick him into admitting that he wasn't a robot.

The tall flyer seemed to sense his thought. He said, "You fool, do you think I'd give your show away? I've known for days that you weren't a robot. I've heard you and O'Day talking at night."

"Come in," Hill snapped, "and shut the door."

Gregory obeyed.

Hill's voice was tight: "Tell me about it!"

"I brought my ship in right behind Brian's. The Flight Chief's stooge, Borsi, reported right away that Doc Barclay wasn't in the plane. They ordered Brian into the chief's office to report." Gregory pawed at his mouth. "They wanted to know what had become of Doc, and Brian told 'em that he'd jumped. Borsi called him a liar. He found a branch on the landing gear. Brian'd set the ship down somewhere—they knew that then. They tried to make him talk."

"Go on! Go on!"

"Borsi was clear across the room when Brian rushed him. There was six or eight guards there, and more piled in. Brian cleaned house for a minute, but there were too many of them. They beat him up pretty bad."

"And took him to 'A' Level?"

"Right."

Hill reached for his jacket. "This does it," he said bitterly. "I've got an hour, maybe less, till they get Brian under the lie detector, and then we're all through!"

"Huh?"

"De Spain'll find out where Doc is; he'll find out about the two hundred poor devils out there, and send another ship out to bomb them. He'll find out about our plan!" His hand slipped into his pocket, brought out the wickedly compact Delta gun. "He'll find out about this."

Gregory said: "If I can take Brian's place in that plan, count me in."

"I might need help," Hill snapped. "Stand by here, I'll be back as soon as I can get back."

"Where are you going?"

"To the hospital!"

The slow robot's stride maddened Hill's shredded, already raw nerves. Precious seconds were flashing by, and yet he was limited to this dragging walk. Even the elevator's plummeting drop to the hospital level seemed slow.

The slim young nurse was at her desk in Barclay's outer office when Hill came through the door. She looked up to smile and say with professional briskness:

"Mr. Hill, is there something I can do for—"

Her voice stopped, and her eyes jerked wide as Hill leaned across the desk. His lips twitched. "Listen," he rasped, "you can do everything. Right now you've got three lives on your desk—no, three hundred would be closer. You've got to help, you've got to help save Doc Barclay's life, and Brian O'Day's!"

"But what—"

He told her then, told her in terse bulletlike sentences. The color drained from her face, and her splayed fingers were pressed hard over her mouth long before he had finished.

"But what can I do?"

"One little thing. One simple little thing. You get Theta De Spain down here at once!"

"I'll try!"

Hill watched her trim figure through the door. There was nothing he could do then but wait. Wait, while the second hand made its year-long journeys around the face of the wall clock. While sweat beaded his upper lip, and ran cold on his back. Wait! Wait!

Quick footsteps in the hall. Hill spun, arms raising. The door snickered back and a white-clad figure entered the room.

"Where is she?" he asked thickly.

"I had to call her on the inter-level phone," the nurse said. "They wouldn't let me go up to 'A' Level. First I tried to tell her that Peter Paul wanted to see her. She said she'd be down in an hour or so. Then I had to tell her part of it!"

A bleakness came into Hill's face. "Yes?"

"I only told her part of it. She guessed the rest. She said she'd—she'd. . . ."

Hill's fingers bit deep in her arm.

"She said to tell you it would be ready in exactly eleven minutes. I don't know what she meant."

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"I do!" Hill leaped for the door.

"Mr. Hill! Mr. Hill," the nurse called, 'your—"

The closing door cut off her words. Eleven minutes, Hill thought savagely, and the elevator would be waiting at the surface level. Yes, and he'd be waiting for it. His chance was small—he knew that—but each passing minute, each passing second, shaved it thinner. Once O'Day faced the spinning discs of the lie detector there was no chance at all!

O'Day would talk, no human flesh could resist that merciless machine. He'd talk, and the whole plan would come out. De Spain would fix things then, damned quickly. He, O'Day, Doctor Barclay, Theta, the two hundred who waited at the mine—they'd all pay.

THE elevator took him back to the Hangar Level where Gregory waited. Hill got the shielded box out of his suitcase, and slipped the Delta gun inside it. He snapped quick words at Gregory as he went back to the door.

"It's fixed so we've got a chance. There's nothing you can do. Ten minutes, now, and it'll be over, one way or the other."

Gregory's hand came up in a stiff salute. "Happy landing," he said fervently.

Four minutes had ticked away when Hill reached the second elevator. There was another pilot waiting there, and the two of them rode to the surface together. Only one plane rested on the floor of the big hangar. A half-dozen mechanics were grouped around that; a big-shouldered guard paced a beat along the far wall. There was no one else in sight.

Hill moved slowly past the fuel tanks, past the doorway of the Flight Chief's office and around the corner. Once there he melted into the shadow of a bomb truck and waited with his eyes on the dial of his watch.

The distant buzz of voices reached his ears, and after a while the plane motor started humming. Four minutes left. Three and a half. Three. . . .

"Going some place, robot?"

Borsi's drawling, remembered voice came from behind, jerked Hill rigid. Thin seconds ticked away while the muscles worked along Hill's jaw. He couldn't turn—not without admitting he wasn't a robot, for his name hadn't been used—and if he didn't he'd never be allowed to reach that elevator.

"The mental giant," Borsi went on, "the wise guy, the hot flyer, the yowl man, the robot. . . ."

The drawled words burned in Hill's brain. The voice was stronger now. Borsi was moving around to the side. Another half minute and he could see the dark, sneering face: the Delta gun which glittered in his hand.

"So?" The gun snout was pointed at Hill's stomach. "You're a robot, huh? Sure, just as much as I'm a robot." An ugly sheen came into his eyes. "De Spain's goin' to be plenty interested in this."

Hill didn't move, didn't speak. If only Borsi came close enough! If that gun barrel wavered, even for a second. . . .

Precious seconds ticked away.

"You're the wise guy, yeah. You're the guy that pushed me around. Twice you did that! Twice, damn you, and no other man has ever put a hand on me and lived. Well, you won't live either! You're goin' down and call on De Spain and explain how your eyes got white!"

The words hit Hill like the impact of a mailed fist. His eyes *were* white! He'd been reaching for the fluid when Gregory had interrupted him; and from that moment on he'd never thought of it. The nurse had called after him, and he hadn't stopped. That was what she had been trying to tell him.

Desperate words spilled from his lips. "You win, guy, I'm not a robot. You win, but you won't gain anything by giving the show away. I can give you a break that'll put you in better with De Spain than if you turned me in. I've got it here in this box."

"Yeah? What is it?"

It might work! It might work! Borsi was interested. Hill could hear him thinking, "If he's got anything I'll grab it, and then turn him in."

"Sure." Hill made his voice low and eager. "This is a cross control for planes. He can use it to check on the position of . . . . Here, I'll show you. . . ."

"Don't move!" Borsi's finger tightened on the trigger. "Fast one, huh? Not on me, guy. You put that box on the floor, and back up!"

"Right!" Hill knew then that hope was gone. There was nothing he could do now. Nothing but rush Borsi when he stepped over to the box. Rush him—and die!

Hill put the box down on the floor at his feet.

Borsi snapped: "Back up!"

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Hill was stepping back when the elevator doors clanged open!

The brazen note brought Borsi's head around, and the gun snout dropped. Hill stepped to one side, and in that fleeting heartbeat of time, dived.

The Delta gun coughed pale flame, but the slugs were wild. Hill's shoulder hit Borsi's hip and they went down together. A snapping wrist lock took care of the gun, sent it skittering across the floor. Borsi was rolling when Hill stumbled to his feet.

Hill's driving shoulder caught Borsi again, spilled him backward across the floor. Hill whirled to snatch up the box. That elevator would remain open only thirty seconds and then, with or without him, it would drop back to "A" Level.

Hill was coming erect when Borsi straightened with the gun in his hand. Hill's arm snapped over and down, and the box hit Borsi full in the face. He fell, limply this time, his face a bloody mask. Hill scooped up the box, ran.

HE WAS still ten feet away when the elevator doors began to close. Hill crossed that last ten feet like a sprinter, slipped through the narrowing opening, and slammed hard against the far side of the cage. The starting shock as the elevator dropped nearly knocked him off his feet.

Speed, Hill thought grimly—everything depended on speed alone now. He had to get down the hall and into De Spain's quarters before Borsi recovered consciousness and got to a phone. Five minutes was all he could count on, maybe less. His arm tightened on the box. Yes, but a Delta gun would empty a fifty-shot clip in ten seconds. And even a half dozen shots would take care of De Spain.

The elevator stopped. Hill dropped his eyelids so that only a slit of the telltale white would show if anyone saw him. His face stiffened into the expressionless mask of a robot. "I'm coming, Brian," he whispered. "Just a minute now and I'll be there."

The doors yawned on the blue-walled hallway. It was empty and still. *Too still.* Hill remembered the first time he tried to take a gun down its shining length. How quiet it had been then, and how hell had broken loose before he'd covered half the distance from the elevator to the door of De Spain's quarters.

Sweat started on his back. His loose-kneed, shambling stride took him ten feet, twenty feet. The flesh crawled on his neck. The ominous silence stretched his raw nerves taut.

The sharp *snick* behind him came ten seconds later. Something blunt and round prodded his back, and a big voice said:

"I'll take that box!"

Hill froze there, unmoving. There was no mistaking the menace in that chill voice. The guard *wanted* to shoot. He was trapped! What a blundering fool he'd been to place his trust in Theta. Bitterness ran deep within him. Vivid lips, and eyes that brimmed with tears. Sure, he'd walked neatly into the trap, and with him died the last chance for three hundred others!

Up ahead a panel slipped back and four or five guards stepped out into the hall.

Just a ticking second of hesitation. Hill knew the guard behind him couldn't fire. Not now. Not unless he wanted to kill his mates, for one man's body would never stop a Delta slug. A big knuckled hand was pulling at the box under his arm when Hill whirled. He had a flashing glimpse of a rage-contorted face, a down-swinging arm.

The blow brushed his shoulder. Hill's fist thudded deep into the guard's stomach, and Hill's knee came up to smash into the guard's groin. The guard fell, crumpling like a dropped coat. A bull voice yelled: "Get him! Get him!" Two or three blurred figures were rushing at Hill as he stooped to twist the gun out of the guard's hand.

He had it! He was turning when the gun barrel slashed down. The flicker of bright steel had been his only warning. Hill tried to duck, tried to roll with the blow, and failed. Pain and roaring lights exploded in his head, and the gun-sight scraped his cheek. A second blow drove him to his knees.

A boot slammed into his ribs, brought blades of exquisite pain shooting up through his chest. Hill pulled his knees up, rolled. Hands clawed at him, and the bellowing sound grew.

The wall was at his back then, and Hill was trying to come to his knees, trying to bring the gun up. His finger was tightening on the trigger when the weight crashed down on his head.

There was pain after that and lights and the dull taste of blood in his mouth. There were screamed curses above him and many blows. He tried to roll, tried to pull his arms up to protect his face from the lashing feet. He failed. His body

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was rocking, bouncing under the rain of kicks. They didn't hurt. Not now. Nothing hurt except the knowledge that he'd failed, that Theta had trapped him.

Then, even the lights vanished and there was only silence. Thick silence, and pain-shot blackness that rolled up around him in waves.

CHAPTER XXIII

PRISONERS OF DE SPAIN

STEVEN HILL could hear voices. The words didn't penetrate his fog-warped consciousness, but the sound, like the soft light which came faintly through his eyelids, had been there always. Always since that fearful beating in the corridor.

Was it two or three or four times he'd tried to sit up? The fresh taste of blood had come into his mouth each time, and big, gentle hands forced him back on this bed.

Was it three, four, or five times he'd tried to see the guard's face? Hell, it didn't matter. Nothing mattered but to lie here behind closed eyes and rest. He didn't want to think, for thought meant Theta and the trap she'd set for him. Thought meant the cool, smiling O'Day, who must either be a robot now, or be dead. It meant Anna Overbeck, the stooped and gentle old woman who would pay for her mercy. It meant the three hundred damned souls who waited in the black hell under that distant hill top. It meant Doctor Johnny Barclay, whose words rang again and again in Hill's head, "Sorry, whatever it cost I have no choice. Those people need me. I am a doctor, I have to stay." But always thought meant Theta.

He didn't want to think. Hell, he was thinking!

The murmurous voice sound was louder. Hill opened his eyes, and closed them instantly as the light bit through to his brain. He moved his hands, felt a smooth wall, the rumpled bed clothing. Then something cool brushed his face and a remembered voice said:

"Hello, Steve."

Hill opened his eyes again to look up at Brian O'Day. The big Irishman's lips were puffed, an ugly purple bruise covered one cheekbone. Steven Hill swallowed twice before he could put his thought into faint words.

"Hello, mug, I guess I—I messed it up."

"No, Steve, you didn't. You tried, and God knows you took an awful kicking around, but you never had a chance. De Spain was waiting for you."

"Yes," Hill whispered, "I know. Theta fixed that. She—she set the trap, and I walked in."

Brian O'Day's hand leaped suddenly to smother Hill's words. An odd brightness had come into the Irishman's eyes. He was trying to speak when the cool voice came from somewhere behind him.

"Don't bother, Brian, I heard him. I might have expected this."

O'Day said, "Wait, Theta, he's jumping at conclusions. He didn't mean that, no more than he meant the rest of the things he's said these past three days."

"Theta here!" A husky tightness came into Steven Hill's throat, and he whispered, "Let me up, damn you, let me up!"

"Easy now, Steve."

Painfully Hill got his legs off the bed. His right arm was useless. Twice he pushed himself up with his left arm, and twice he fell back before Brian O'Day's gentle arms went around his shoulders.

Nausea knotted Steven Hill's stomach, beat in waves in his skull. A cough started new agony in his chest, and he spat fresh blood.

O'Day said: "Easy, Steve."

Hill said, "Get out of the way."

The Irishman moved aside and Hill's eyes raked the small room. Two cots, three bare walls, and a barred door. Beyond that, a second barred door, and a familiar, slender figure pressed against the bars. Theta De Spain! Her beauty still a vibrant flame in spite of the strain lines around her mouth, in spite of the scorn in her eyes.

Hill's voice was husky. "What are you doing here?"

"You should know the answer to that!" It was Brian O'Day who spoke. "You know how Alpha De Spain feels about people who try to kill him. Why do you think she's here?"

"I—I thought. . . ."

"Sure. You thought she'd trapped you. She didn't; it was the phone call from the nurse. Every call has to go through the board, and the operator has instructions to listen. De Spain didn't like the sound of it so he asked questions, and put her under the lie detector when he didn't get the answers he wanted."

"I'm sorry," Hill said. "Theta, will you forgive me?"

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She didn't move. "It's all right, Steve."

The Irishman brought Hill a cup of steaming coffee. "Drink this," he ordered. "There's the last of our brandy in it." He sat down on a low stool. "You might as well know the rest. You've been out for three days, and you don't need a diagram to know what that means. The earth has passed the Y-point. There's nothing we could do now with the help of the army; nothing anybody could do now."

"No!" The cup trembled in Hill's hand.

The Irishman nodded. "The guard says De Spain's only waiting till you can walk. Then three of us are going up to 'A' Level, and after that it won't be nice. He promised me a ride in a plane—a long ride—and then we can walk back. He's putting us out, Steve."

"It would have to be something like that." Hill drained the cup, said: "I'm getting up, Brian."

His legs creaked with pain, and each breath brought new agony. His jaw clamped tight, and sweat stood out white on his face. Slowly, very slowly, he made his way to the door and stood there, clinging to the bars.

Theta said: "You shouldn't, Steve."

"I had to apologize," he said gruffly. "I'm a fool, maybe, but the thought that you might have lied hurt—plenty. I'm glad I was wrong."

"I know, Steve."

Steven Hill got one arm through the bars. "If—if you . . . ."

A faint, ageless smile touched her lips. Their hands could barely meet, her fingers lay cool against his palm. Hill started to speak, and then let the words die unsaid. This moment, this fleeting exquisite pain, this ecstasy, was complete.

Then, from far down the dimly lighted corridor there came the clang of an elevator door, and the sound of moving feet.

The pressure of her fingers was strong against his. "I'm sorry, Steve, sorry. Those others might have lived if . . . ."

Hill's face was a stony mask. He turned his eyes down the corridor. Words—almost a prayer—whispered through his mind. One chance! He must get one chance to lock his hands around De Spain's throat!

THE tramp of approaching feet echoed hollowly down the corridor for a full minute before the guard came in sight. Steven Hill stayed where he was, pressed tight against the door of the cell, his arm thrust through the bars, his hand clasping Theta De Spain's.

Her dark eyes clung to him. "Whatever happens. . . ."

"Nothing will happen."

"Romantic, huh?" The big-necked, tiny-eyed guard stepped a little way from the door, placed two food baskets on the floor. "You're hard to kill, guy. An' as soon's you can get back on your feet you start holdin' hands. Swell. . . ."

Hill's voice cut like a whip. "Shut up!"

The guard laughed. "Will you look who's gettin' tough?" He glided toward them, his hand going to the Delta gun at his hip. "Get away from that door, bucko. Get clear away from it. Get over on your bed. An' don't move while I'm puttin' your food inside or you'll stop a couple o' dozen slugs."

Steven Hill's lips flattened against his teeth. Brian O'Day was beside him then. "Come on, Steve, he's got all the cards."

"Right." Hill's eyes went to the girl. "Sorry." He turned and limped painfully back across the room to his bed. O'Day propped a couple of pillows up to form a back rest, and pushed Hill down into a sitting position.

The big Irishman's face was thoughtful as he asked, "How's your chest, Steve?"

"All right." Hill grinned wanly. "Very nice as long as I keep my breathing shallow."

The guard was unlocking the door then. His unsheathed gun was in his right hand, and he didn't take his eyes off them as he slid the basket inside, yanked the door shut.

"There's food," he grunted. "They sent down some tape for Hill's chest. Better fix him up good. From what I hear you're goin' to play Eskimo." He unlocked Theta's cell door, pushed her basket inside. "You an' Hill will have plenty of time to hold hands." He laughed.

O'Day padded over to the door. "Why don't you get a whip?" he asked the guard. "You could do a better job with that."

"So now you get tough?" The guard's tiny eyes glittered.

"Tough?" O'Day shook his head. "No, I'm not getting tough. Only a fool would do that when he's behind a barred door and the other man's got a gun. No, big neck, I'm not getting tough—now. But I hope you're around when the time comes. I'd like to see that backbone of yours melt and that bluster turn to a scream."

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Red rage came into the guard's face. "You idiot!"

"Maybe. That's on the lap of the gods. But I'll be waiting for you."

"I got a damn good notion not to send the kid down here now, gabby—"

Theta's icy voice cut in. "You've got another notion, Burke. You know the boy wouldn't be here without father's order, and you know that I will see father at least once more. You'd better carry out your orders."

The guard was growling under his breath as he swung around to shout: "Hey, Jake, send the kid down."

"Dad!" The boyish shout rang clear above the quick patter of running feet. A small, stocky figure brushed past the guard to pause uncertainly before the barred door. The smile went out of the boy's blue eyes. "Dad, they—they got you in jail!"

O'Day dropped to one knee, leaned against the door. "Now wait a minute, son, it isn't as bad as that. You see, we're going on a long trip, and we've had to train for it. You remember, I told you how fighters train. Well, this is the same thing."

"Honest?"

"You got ten minutes." The guard pivoted away.

"Sure." O'Day fumbled for a cigarette. "Sure. We'll be gone a long time—maybe six months—and I want you to behave while we're gone. I want to be proud of you when I come back. You'll keep studying, and. . . ."

"But, Dad, why didn't Mr. De Spain have me train, too?"

A low word, barely audible: "What?"

"Sure, I shoulda been trainin', too. Mr. De Spain told me this morning I was going on a trip with you an' Miss Theta, an' Steve. I shoulda got in shape for it, too."

A WHITE line appeared suddenly around O'Day's mouth. His nostrils had a pinched-in look, and the glance he sent Steven Hill was dark and glazed.

"Peter Paul," he said slowly, "what did Mr. De Spain say?"

"That's what he said, Dad. I met him in the hall this morning, and he told me I could come down and see you."

Theta said: "Thank God that's it!"

The boy whirled at the sound of her voice. "Miss Theta! They've got you in jail—training, too."

"Yes. Peter."

"Gee, we'll have fun together."

"What else did he say?"

"He told me I'd better pack my clothes because I was going on a long trip with you an' Miss Theta, and Steve—only he said Steven Hill."

"Right!" O'Day pushed his right fist through the bars, jogged the boy's chin affectionately. "You go talk to Miss Theta for a minute. I've got to talk to Steve."

"Yes, sir." The boy clicked his heels, and his small hand came up in a salute.

O'Day came heavily to Steven Hill's side.

Hill said: "Sorry, Brian. Maybe De Spain'll change his mind. This is probably his idea of a joke."

"You know better than that. He's wanted to get rid of Peter Paul ever since they found him. This is his chance. We won't have a chance, Steve, not a ghost of a chance. Ben Wilson told me the temperature would drop to a hundred below zero in sixty days. Then—to two hundred below!"

Hill said: "I know."

"Look. This was war, and we lost. All right. I'm not kicking, and I won't. Better men than I have died in the last three months, plenty of them. But this is dirty and low and mean. This isn't war, it's murder! Peter Paul hasn't done anything. How could a five-year-old boy hurt De Spain?"

"Steady, fella. We've done the best we could. Twice we tried to get through to De Spain, and twice we missed. This is the kick-off, and there's nothing we can do. There might still be a chance if we had a. . . ." He stopped then, eyes brightening.

O'Day's teeth flashed white, and both men said, "The gun!" at the same time.

Then Hill was asking, "How did you know about it?"

"You said a lot of things while you were delirious. We heard about the tidal wave, the two guns, and how you hid one of 'em in your plane. You said a lot of other things, too." O'Day jerked his head at the girl. "Some nice, some not so nice."

Steven Hill's mouth twitched. "I would," he said. "I would make a damn fool of myself."

"Let that go for now. How about this gun?"

"It's a relic," Hill answered bitterly. "It's forty years old. A forty-five I think the card said. It uses big lead bul-

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The Irishman counted coolly—"One, two, three"—holding De Spain by his blouse, close to the X-bomb between them

lets. There were two clips. I fired it once. The thing makes more noise than a cannon, and recoil—God bless it—the damn thing nearly tore my thumb off."

"I know." O'Day's eyes shone. "I've used one of those guns. They don't throw many shells; six or seven, I can't remember which. But one of those will tear a hole in a man you can throw your hat through. Hit a man with one of those slugs and he's really through. We'll get that."

Hill caught O'Day's arm. "You—you wouldn't send Peter Paul?"

"Why not?" O'Day asked harshly. "De Spain's going to send him out with us. The world's passed the Y-point, and there's no way it can be put back on its orbit now for eight months. We're going to die, the boy's going to die. This is a cock-eyed, crazy little chance, but we've got to play it. Hell, at the worst he'll die quickly. And that is all any man can ask."

Steven Hill nodded slowly. "Maybe he can't get into the hangar, and maybe someone's already found that gun. And if he does get it he might not be able to get back. Still—we've got to try!" He went back to the door.

The boy turned from Theta's door and smiled. Then, his back stiff, his tiny chin up, he came to his father. Theta remained where she was, her dark eyes glistening. The low words reached Hill's ears.

"Listen, son, we've got a job for you. A very hard job. You've got to be a man now; you've got to do a man's job. And listen, you've got to keep this job a secret. Can you do that?"

"Like a spy, huh? Sure."

"Wait. Do you think you could get back down here this afternoon?"

"Sure. Blackie West's runnin' the elevator. He'd let me come down any time. I'd 'a' been here earlier but Mr. De Spain told me to pack."

"Good. You're to leave here and go straight to the hangar level. You know how to get there. Then you find the pursuit ships—they're back against the

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wall—and climb into the cockpit of number—"

"Twenty-three," Hill supplied.

"You climb into the cockpit of number twenty-three. Don't touch anything but the seat. You'll find a slit in the cushion, near the back, and you'll find a gun in there. Bring it to me. Now, this is the most important of all. You must not let anyone see you!"

"Yes, sir."

"Yes, sir."

"Right." O'Day's big hand swallowed his son's small one. "Scoot."

Peter Paul whirled and trotted away.

O'DAY stood there, and stared down the corridor for a long time after the boy had vanished. Then he turned heavily. "Food first, Steve, and then I've got to tape your ribs."

"I'm not hungry."

"You'll eat anyway. God alone knows what's ahead."

Steven Hill spoke only once during the meal. "What about electric ears?" he asked. "Surely De Spain would put them in these cells."

Theta's face shone pale in the gloom of her cell. "He did," she said. "They're just like all the other ears. They record all the sound automatically. The records are played once a day." She looked away. "Generally around six in the evening."

Brian O'Day's eyes seemed to sink deeper into his skull with each passing hour. He taped Hill's chest in utter silence, and then sat where he could watch the corridor. Sweat glistened on his upper lip, and muscles worked along the clean line of his jaw.

The afternoon was half gone when Theta said: "I've just remembered. There's a little stand—a round one—against the wall in father's quarters. You touch the center disc in the design on its top and the sides open. There are grenades there."

"Grenades?" Hill asked sharply.

"Yes. They're something new. Father calls them X-grenades. They've not been named yet. He showed me how they work. They're made in two parts, and fitted together in the center. You twist the two halves until they click. Then you've got three seconds. They're full of some new high explosive.

O'Day said bitterly, "I'd like to have a pocket full of them. I'd take 'A' Level to hell with me."

"Steady, man. . . ."

The clang of the elevator door stopped Hill's words. They waited, tensely, for the sound of the footsteps to reach them. Then O'Day was turning away from the door, his face a white mask, his voice dead.

"A guard. I guess Peter Paul didn't make it. He's had plenty of time. Someone must have caught him in the plane."

There was not one guard, but two. The big-necked man was followed by another who carried a six-hundred-shot, lightweight machine gun. The thick-necked man's eyes held ugly lights as he unlocked the doors.

"On your feet, all three of you. This is where you start your one-way trip out."

O'Day cursed him.

CHAPTER XXIV

MUTINY IN THE ARK

ALPHA DE SPAIN was sitting in a deep chair at the far end of the room. He looked up and nodded when the guards brought his daughter, Steven Hill, and Brian O'Day through the door.

"Excellent." His voice was the same chill purr. "Morgan, you may go. One guard is enough." His hand came up. "You, Donnely, stand over against the wall, and keep your hand on your gun."

"Yes, sir."

One guard left, and the other moved over against the wall. De Spain's hand brushed over a bank of toggle switches on the arm of his chair. "The alarms," he said, "just in case you have friends who might be foolish enough to want to die. When those alarms are set, it is impossible to bring a sliver of steel along the hall without my knowledge." Drooping lids veiled his green eyes. His scarf, his blouse—like something from an old Russian print—and his face were all the same pale, lifeless white.

"Steven Hill," De Spain purred, "you'd better sit down. Use that chair just behind you."

O'Day growled, "Get on with it."

"I shall." Green flame smouldered in De Spain's eyes. "You three have given me more trouble than any other inhabitants of the Ark. Twice you've made attempts on my life, and you have disobeyed flight orders. Hill, you were supposed to have been robotized, but that order was ignored. Incidentally, Anna Overbeck committed suicide last night.

"You will not be robotized again—that

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is a temporary measure at best. You will be given some provisions, some clothes; and a plane will take you a thousand miles from here. Then the three, no four, of you can work out your own destinies. I regret this, believe me, but emotion can never be allowed to shadow reason. You have earned this treatment."

"Theta, you will be allowed to take whatever you wish with you. You are my daughter, and a part of me. That you should betray me hurts more than anything has ever hurt. But long ago you learned that any cancerous growth must be destroyed. You know the facts, you know how to reason and you know the answer." Three lines ridged De Spain's deep brow. "You may go to your quarters."

Theta De Spain turned without speaking.

De Spain pulled a small microphone close. "Send two guards with Theta De Spain. They will watch her pack, and bring her luggage here."

A speaker disc said: "Yes, sir."

"Send Borsi in."

"Yes, sir." There was a pause, and then the voice went on. "The boy, Peter Paul O'Day, is here. Shall I send him in to your quarters?"

"Yes."

Hope sprang into Steven Hill's mind, bright hope that died swiftly. Peter Paul could never bring the gun past the Detector Eyes. The alarms would sound as soon as he entered the blue-walled hall.

Electric, growing tension gripped the room. Tension that turned Steven Hill's face into a sweat-streaked mask, knotted his fists on the chair arm. The alarms—damn them—why didn't they ring? Why didn't their brazen clamor start? They had to work unless—unless Peter Paul had failed to find the gun.

Voices in the doorway. One flat and steel-hard, the other light, and shot through with young laughter.

HILL'S jerking eyes found Peter Paul O'Day's smiling face. The boy was looking up at Borsi, saying, "You're going to fly us on our trip? I thought my father was going to fly. He's the best—"

Borsi's flat voice blotted out the words. "Borsi reporting for flight orders, sir."

"Come in. You, Peter Paul, take that chair beside Steven Hill." The smouldering gleam had come back to De Spain's eyes. "Borsi, you will land my daughter, Brian O'Day, and Steven Hill along with such supplies as they will take at a thousand miles from the Ark. The direction choice lies with you."

"Yes, sir." Red hatred looked out of Borsi's lidded eyes as they touched Hill's face. "I'll be glad to do that."

De Spain bounded to his feet. "Keep you damned opinions to yourself. I'm not asking how you feel; I'm giving orders!"

Peter Paul was leaning close to touch Hill's arm when O'Day's quiet voice brought De Spain whirling to face him.

"You're whipped," the Irishman said.

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"You can see it now, even if you won't admit it. Maybe the idea was good at first; maybe it was good on paper—but you know now that it will never work. You've lost. Your ideals and ideas, and all your pure reasoning are gone, lost in a welter of murder! You've stopped being a scientist, and become a butcher. You called it extermination and tried to whitewash it for your conscience. Oh, you've got a conscience. It was buried deep, but it was there. And now it won't let you alone."

De Spain's hands came up in a stiff, small gesture. The cigarette slipped from between his fingers. "Guard," he whispered, "guard, stop. . . ."

O'Day's voice cut like a whip. "You're through. You can't get away from your own black heart. You'll pay; you're already paying. You see how death comes closed. Your daughter now. You've had to robotize half the Twelve. What next? Sooner or later death will touch you. You don't trust your guards any more; you're afraid to sleep!"

The broken words came from De Spain's white lips. "Stop that man!"

The guard snarled, "Save it, guy, or I'll let you have the whole clip."

O'Day shrugged and pivoted half around to face Hill.

De Spain was grinding the cigarette into the carpet when Peter Paul's bell-clear voice asked: "What shall I do with the gun, Dad?"

"Gun!" De Spain came stiffly erect, and then some of the strain went out of his face. "He can't have a gun. It is impossible for anyone to bring a gun past the Detector Eyes. . . ."

A grim smile curved O'Day's lips as his eyes met Hill's. "That's right," he said.

In that fleeting second sure knowledge exploded in Steven Hill's brain. Peter Paul did have the gun! The ancient .45 had come past the Detector Eyes because those eyes worked on the Omicron element in the metal, and Omicron hadn't been invented when that gun was made.

"Give it to Steve, Peter," O'Day said softly.

Brian O'Day moved then. Moved as Peter Paul pushed the big black automatic into Hill's hands, and the gun the guard held winked pale flame.

O'Day stumbled. One arm went limp and sudden redness came out on his jacket sleeve. The roar that burst from his lips was a battle cry—as old as man—and then O'Day was on top of the guard. The Delta gun went spinning away from the guard's hand, and O'Day's fingers found his throat.

Split seconds only. De Spain was speaking into the microphone, pawing at the chair arm, as Steven Hill heaved his battered body up out of his chair. He had time, barely time, to push Peter Paul down behind a table. Then his gun and De Spain's were coming up together.

De Spain's gun might have been fired, but if it was, the small sound was lost in the thunderous roar of Hill's automatic. There had been no time to aim and the first shot was wild, the second brought a screamed curse from De Spain's lips and he dropped his gun to clutch a bloody forearm.

DE SPAIN was turning, his blade-thin nose and deep-set eyes were squarely in the .45's sights and Hill's finger was tightening on the trigger when something slammed into him from the side.

Hill staggered, off-balance, and the gun flame went straight up. Hill spun as he fell. A big-bodied guard was leaping toward him from the door. There wasn't time to aim, there wasn't time to think. The ridged gun butt was slamming back against his palm again and again, and the muzzle flame seemed to touch the guard's grim face.

He heard the bullets strike, saw the red-edged holes appear in the guard's face, and the life go out of his eyes. He went back, as though hit by a giant hand, and fell. His legs kept on moving slowly, jerkily, like the legs of a run-down mechanical toy.

Hill's eyes flicked back to De Spain's chair. De Spain was gone!

Peter Paul was pulling at Hill's arm then, shouting: "Borsi's getting that gun. The one dad knocked out of the guard's hand!" But Hill was already pivoting.

The lean, dark-faced Borsi was still on one knee. He looked up as his fingers clawed for the gun. Panic and fear came into his eyes. He knew that he could never get his gun up in time; knew, then, that this was death! His lips went gray, and he cursed horribly, thinly.

Steven Hill barked, "Drop it!"

Borsi was scooping the gun up as Hill lined the sights, pressed the trigger. There was only a dull click under his finger. Empty! He'd forgotten that this wasn't a Delta gun, that this didn't have a fifty-shot clip.

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"Take it, guy!" The bleak sureness had come back to Borsi's face. The sinister smile touched his lips. Deliberately, he brought the gun up.

Blurring motion flickered in the corner. Steven Hill's aching eyes saw the body of the guard rising over O'Day's head. The Irishman took a single step, and threw the guard. Threw him as though he were a sawdust-stuffed doll.

Borsi saw the flying body then, and hurried his fire. Death's warm breath touched Hill's cheek, and Borsi went down under the hurtling body. O'Day was moving then, shouting as Hill came to his feet.

"I'll take this guy. You watch the door; the army'll be here in a minute!"

Steven Hill found the round table against the wall, slammed his fist down upon the center disc as the alarm bells began to ring. The armed guards were coming, and the Detector Eyes sent their warning ahead. Hill scooped up one of the lemon-sized grenades, ran for the door.

Each breath was searing agony. The dull taste of fresh blood was in his mouth again.

Voices, and the pound of running feet came down the hall. Steven Hill turned the two halves of the grenade in his hand and heard the sharp click. His arm went back and he said, "One. Two." And then he threw it past the door edge. The grenade glanced off the far wall and vanished.

Hill was turning when the floor seemed to rock and buck beneath his feet. A second later he was face down on the rug. Thunderous, ear-hammering sound welled out of that hallway, and a scarlet sheet of flame licked back through the door.

The scream came as Hill staggered upright. Throaty, deep-pitched—a scream of pure animal pain—it clung to a quavering note and then choked off short. It was Borsi who screamed. O'Day's big hands were locked around his throat; his back was bent far back over the edge of a metal table.

Borsi's nails gouged red channels in O'Day's face, but O'Day's terrible grip never slackened. Back. Back. There was a sharp noise, like the breaking of a long-dried stick, and Borsi ceased to move. O'Day let go of him, and then stood there for a long time, staring down.

O'Day's left hand hung straight down at his side, and blood trickled in thick drops from his fingers.

Hill said, "Brian! You're hurt!"

"Scratch, that's all." O'Day pivoted slowly. "I promised him that," he said dully. "I'd have climbed out of hell to keep that promise. He's the guy that followed me down to the animal level, and then turned Peter Paul in." He stooped to pick up one of the Delta guns. "Better grab the one De Spain dropped, Steve. Hell will break loose around here in a minute."

"Did you see De Spain leave?" Hill asked. "I was too busy with . . ."

Peter Paul said, "I saw him. He went through the door right back of his chair. He went up to the rooms up above here. I was up there once."

"Which door?"

"There's two of them back of his chair," the boy said. "One goes down to room under here where Theta lives, and the other one goes up."

"You show me."

Brian O'Day and the boy went toward the chair.

Hill returned to the small table, stuffed a half dozen of the grenades in his pockets.

He took up a position now just inside the hall door, and was still there three minutes later when O'Day joined him.

THE big Irishman's face was set, thoughtful. "How does it look, Steve?"

"That grenade cleaned house, Brian. The hall was packed. There must have been fifteen or twenty guards, and half the Twelve coming. They ran into the blast, and what it did wasn't pretty." Hill swayed and spat fresh blood. "How about the door?"

"I found the switch, but De Spain's got it locked from the inside."

"Where's Peter Paul?"

"The other door opened easily. I sent him down to Theta's where he'd be safe."

A sullen ache pounded Steven Hill's temples. His eyes were feverishly bright, hot, and his throat was dry. He forced a grin, rolled one of the grenades in his hand. "How about one of these? They're very nice for opening things up."

"Won't work, Steve. That door is at least two feet thick, and the passage walls wouldn't be any less. That's special Omicron, a diamond drill wouldn't touch it. We'd be wasting time anyway, De Spain'd have another exit some place."

"Didn't—didn't"—each word required a special effort—"De Spain send a guard with Theta?"

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"Right!" O'Day was whirling.

"Steve! Steve!" The door had snapped open, and Theta's slender figure framed in the opening. Her voice had a husky catch in it. "What happened? Is—is father—"

She's lovely, the thought ran deep within Hill, even in the midst of all this hell she's lovely. He leaned back against the wall.

"He's gone," O'Day said harshly. "He went through that door, and we're wondering where he is now; where he'll attack next."

The words came out at the tail of her breath. "He won't! That passage leads to his sleeping quarters; there is no way out but through this door."

Unholy joy twisted the Irishman's lips. "We've got him," he whispered. "We've got him like a rat in a trap."

"Steve!" Theta's hand touched Hill's arm. "You're hurt!"

"Not hurt," he answered, "just tired. What became of the guard who went with you?"

"He—he ran out when he heard the alarm. Then there was the explosion, and. . . ." Her eyes pulled away from his face and she saw, for the first time, the body of Borsi, the other crumpled figures. Hill watched her fight for self-control, watched her hands knot into fists and the color leave her cheeks. "Is—is there anything I can do?"

Hill said, "Yes, you might bandage O'Day's arm. He stopped a Delta slug. He's losing a lot of blood."

"I'll get bandages." She started for the door.

Hill's hand caught her shoulder. "Not out there, Theta. Most of the guards walked into a grenade out there—it isn't pretty."

"Never mind the arm." O'Day was beside them. "It's only a flesh wound and I've got the blood stopped. We've got to move fast."

Steven Hill nodded. "I can watch the door and the hall from here. You phone."

"Right." The Irishman swung away and Hill could hear his big voice at the phone. "Hangar Level? Give me Gregory. . . . Hello, Greg. We've taken over 'A' Level . . . never mind how, but we need help. Borsi's dead, so there won't be a guard at the armory. You know which men to bring. Vach, Ames, Blue, Gordon, and anyone else you're sure of. Crash the armory and come down here with plenty of guns. Better leave a man or two there just in case somebody else gets ideas."

Hill grinned.

CHAPTER XXV.

DE SPAIN'S ULTIMATUM

THE chairs in the long conference room had been pushed back against the wall. Small arms, fifty-shot clips, X-bombs, Delta machine guns and six hundred shot drums were stacked on the long table. Brian O'Day was there, deep pain lines around his mouth, a bandage on his left arm. Steven Hill drank black coffee as he sat in a chair near the door.

"We've got the edge." The big Irishman smoked thoughtfully. "De Spain can't move without walking into trouble. We've got two guards watching his door, two more at the armory, and others on the elevators. There wasn't any opposition. Most of the people in the Ark are with us, and the rest are afraid to start anything."

"Yes, but it isn't over yet, and it won't be as long as De Spain's alive."

"I know. He's a smooth devil. I'd feel better if he was trying something. This quiet isn't good; he'll figure some fiendish scheme. Hell, we'll take care of that when the time comes. Where's Theta?"

"She and Ben Wilson are going over the calculation sheets they found in De Spain's office."

"I'll go and. . . ."

The snap of the opening door stopped his words, brought him whirling around. Moon-faced, chunky Ben Wilson, and Theta, came in. Wilson's eyes shone behind thick glasses and his voice was shot through with excitement.

"Look!" He waved a sheaf of papers. "Look here! This is the stuff I've been trying to get for weeks. This is the data De Spain had on the orbit change. I—I tried to work out his formula, but my original equation wasn't quite right. Alpha De Spain's the only man in the world who knows exactly what. . . ."

Steven Hill was on his feet. "You can leave out the technical details—we wouldn't understand, anyway. What chance is there?"

O'Day asked: "What is this?"

"Theta and I sent for Wilson," Hill explained quickly. "You knew the earth was fifteen hours past the Y-point according to Wilson's figures and. . . ."

"I was wrong," the chunky mathematician cut in; "I did the best I could, but I

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didn't have the data I needed. Now. . . ."

"We've still got twenty-two hours," Theta finished.

"Then we can still put the world back on its orbit?"

"No. The control board's in father's rooms."

O'Day swore, and Hill turned, hands coming stiffly out from his sides. "Twenty-two hours," he said in a voice limned with bitterness. "A margin as narrow as that! We win and yet we lose. Twenty-two hours!" His eyes touched the girl's face. "What kind of a board is that?"

"A small one," she said. "The switches are all operated by remote control."

"Do you know where the cables are?"

"Yes, but—"

Steven Hill spun. "Get electrical engineers up here. Two or three of them. Get a torch, all kinds of tools; cable, a control panel, everything. We're cutting in ahead of De Spain's board!"

"It took months to. . . ."

"We have to try," Hill snapped. "Now look, we'll run a cable in here. You can have the engineers hooking up the board. I'll cut the wall out with a torch and then we'll switch over."

O'Day leaped for the Inter-Level phone.

Hill turned to Wilson. "You won't have anything to do for hours," he said. "You can be sure your figures check."

The chunky man nodded.

"Theta, if you'll show me where the cables are."

She said: "Wait, Steve, we'll have to make that cut in father's office. There are ears built into the walls. We'll have to find those first or father might. . . ."

Hill nodded. She didn't have to finish her sentence. If De Spain knew or guessed what they were attempting to do he could wreck their plans by merely closing a half dozen of the tiny switches. Far below them, fifty or a hundred of the huge dynamos would stop their thunderous snarl, and every life remaining on the earth would be snuffed out like a candle flame in a gale.

Finding the ears took time, precious time. Two, three, four, five times Steven Hill brought the tapering snout of the cutting torch close to the silvery wall panels, pressed the starting switch. White flame hissed softly there, a thin blade of flame that cut the metal as a razor slices silk. Gloved and waiting hands caught the segment of metal as it came loose, and then the cutting flame passed across the conduit leading away from the electric ear. Four hours had slipped away before Theta whispered:

"I think that's all."

"Right." Hill gripped her arm, led her back to the conference room. "We'll have two or three men in there to make noise. That'll cover us just in case we missed one. Show me where the cables are."

O'Day met them at the door. "The juice experts are bringing up the supplies. I found a guy who worked on the board in De Spain's quarters. Then I sent four planes out. One to take a doctor out to replace Johnny Barclay and to bring him back here. The others to try and find those other groups that are still alive!"

Steven Hill said: "We're cutting into the cables now."

"Has De Spain made any move?"

"No." Hill pushed past him. "I'd feel better if he would."

O'Day said bleakly, "So would I."

HOURS passed then, hectic hours which seemed to melt away. The guard shifts changed behind the machine gun which covered the foot-thick door to De Spain's quarters. And a new gang of men cleaned the wreckage out of the hall.

The cutting torch sliced the wall away, showed the metal-incased cable where it lay against the naked rock. Other cables, fat and shiny, were laid from the conference room where a half dozen experts worked over the control board.

There was coffee, black and steaming, and the welcome taste of a snatched cigarette. A thousand unforeseen details arose, and each of them took time. Time they didn't have to spare. And always, like a black and silent threat, there was the knowledge that Alpha De Spain was still alive. The greatest brain the world had ever known was still pitted against them. That knowledge brought their eyes, time and again, to the speaker horns which hung, ominously silent, from the ceiling.

Pressure, and the growing sureness that the fight was not yet over. De Spain wouldn't give up, not that easily, and each passing hour meant that he had had more time, more opportunity to plan.

Once O'Day stooped beside Hill to ask: "Are you sure you didn't get him with that forty-five?"

Steven Hill's eyes were pain-glazed, and he breathed only from the top of his lungs. "Sorry. I saw him just before he

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got inside that vault of his. The bullet caught his hand."

O'Day's mouth jerked. "There's hell brewing!"

Then the most difficult and delicate task of all, the stripping of the metal sheath away from the wires that lay beneath it. Steven Hill did that job himself; did it with a tiny, diamond-toothed saw. Thousandths of an inch counted here and every move had to be as sure, as precise as the flashing stroke of a surgeon's scalpel.

Twice, three times, he stopped for breath, and to brush the sweat out of his eyes. Ben Wilson stooped beside him once to ask, "How long?" Steven Hill shook his head, but after that he didn't stop again.

Then the job was done, and the tiny wires lay bare. Hill pushed himself erect, said unsteadily, "She's all yours."

Others were already crowding past him. Sure-handed, skillful men who would make the change-over. Hill swayed and one of the guards stepped forward to put his arm across Hill's shoulders, to say, "There's a chair over here."

Hill shook his head stubbornly. "Got to get to the control board. Got to find out how much time is left."

"I know," the guard said. "There's nearly three hours left."

Hill stumbled down the hall to the conference room. Wilson was there, crouched in a chair in front of the control board, his eyes fixed on the flickering dials. He threw Hill a swift smile, and then spoke into a microphone at his elbow. "Check one. Check one."

Theta and O'Day came in then, and close behind them was a tall man whose hollow cheeks and sunken eyes brought a tightness to Hill's throat.

"Barclay," he said thickly, "hello, Doc."

"Hello, Steve." Barclay's burning eyes raked Hill's face, and then he said, "You should be in bed, you know that, don't you?"

"How about you?"

An odd light came into Barclay's eyes. "Me? It doesn't matter much what I do. Not now."

A question sprang to Hill's lips. "But why. . . ."

"De Spain speaking!" The icy, roaring voice of the horns cut Hill's question short, brought his eyes swinging to O'Day's face and then to the horns. "I am speaking to you, the people of the Ark. You have three hours in which to surrender, and to vacate 'A' Level. I offer no compromise, and no alternative. Though I am, to all appearances, a prisoner in these rooms, I still hold the deciding force within my hands.

"I have here a weapon more terrible, more efficient, more deadly than any before known. Should you decide not to surrender you, all of you, will follow the other people of the world into swift oblivion. You will die, and not pleasantly. That is my statement, the choice lies with you. Surrender or die!"

O'Day swore.

Steven Hill found Theta's eyes, asked, "What has he got up there?"

"I—I don't know, but then he never told me about any of his experiments until they were completed. This must be something new."

One of the guards appeared in the door. "What're we goin' to do?" His frantic eyes jerked from face to face. "He'll. . . ."

O'Day took a single step forward. "You're going to finish your job!"

"What's the use if. . . ."

"Let us worry about that." The guard flinched away from the cold fury in O'Day's voice. He whirled and disappeared.

Barclay said: "If there's anything I can do, anything at all. . . ."

"There is!" O'Day pushed a gun into his hand. "Go in there and keep those electricians working. I've got to get Gregory and Ames and Blue back up here. Hell's going to break loose!"

Ben Wilson's head jerked up, his glasses caught the light and his eyes were vaguely troubled behind the glistening panes. Then he spoke into his microphone again. "Check five and six. Check five and six."

The horns came to life for the second time and De Spain's voice seemed to fill the room: "Two hours and fifty minutes remain in which to make your decision. Do you want life or death? Do you wish to die horribly, or to go on under my rule to a long and happy life?

"There will be food and warmth and comfort in the new world. There will be no war or disease, but you know all these things. You know what advantages will be yours if you surrender. And if you don't, this globe will hurtle through space for all eternity—barren and lifeless. No human shall ever again set foot upon its soil. On the one hand life and all it can offer; on the other, death! The decision rests with you."

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CHAPTER XXVI

THE BATTLE FOR THE ARK

THETA broke the aching silence. "You did everything you could do, Steve. So did Brian."

"This isn't over yet!" he told her harshly.

Wilson's unperturbed voice said: "Check six and seven. Check six and seven!"

Gregory and Ames burst into the room then. Gregory's lip was split, his shirt was ripped from shoulder to waist. "They're goin' crazy on 'B' Level," he said tightly. "We had to fight our way to the elevator. This is going to get bad."

Hill's hands came out. "You can't blame them for wanting to live, but they can't see what De Spain's doing. He wants the Ark, and he wants it badly, but he won't destroy it! Call that a hunch if you want to, but I know I'm right. Theta says he has only a small lab up there, and that he hasn't done much experimental work lately. He's trying to start the lower levels fighting. Then he'll have us trapped. We can't shoot. They'll force us to surrender. They'll force us to surrender and he's bluffing!"

Gregory got a machine gun off the table, snapped a six hundred shot drum in place. "You'd better be right. He's got us between the devil and the deep. Either way, we die. If the mob below forces us to surrender, De Spain will damn well take care of us, and unless he's lying we die if we don't surrender. I—I hope you're right!" He turned toward the door. "Maybe we can't shoot them, but if these slugs are going over their heads they'll think twice before they rush."

Steven Hill was strapping a gun belt around his hips when Theta touched his arm, pointed to the red disc on the wall that winked redly. "The Inter-Level phone."

Hill was already there. "Yes?"

"This's Slade speaking from the armory. They're rushing us. There must be a hundred of 'em. We—we can't shoot these people! Maybe they're right. Anyway they're only tryin' to live. There're women out there, and some of the flyers!"

"Can you hold them off?"

"They're bringing the pursuit ships up. They're going to use the guns on them to get in. They're . . . *God!*" A husky, pain-clouded, wordless whisper ran thin in the speaker. Then, faint words: "The slugs are—are comin' through the wall! We—we aren't going to be able to hold them off. I couldn't shoot those guys any longer. Sorry. . . . *There's blood on my arm, on my shirt. Great God, it's my blood!*"

"Slade!" Hill's lips were close to the transmitter. "Slade! What's. . . ."

There was a crash, the faint rattle of distant gunfire, and then the line went dead.

Hill spun away from the phone. Brian O'Day's big body loomed in the doorway just as he reached it. Hill threw swift words at him.

"They've rushed the armory. We've got to wreck the elevator or they'll be down here in a minute."

"It's too late!" O'Day snapped. "The electricians bolted. They jumped the guards and got a couple of machine guns. We tried to head them off, but they've got a barricade put up in front of the elevator."

Steven Hill stopped. "No—we can't kill them. They want to live, and they've got just as much right to decide whose side they're on as we have. That means they'll surrender."

"It means those poor devils waiting in that mine will die. It means that the other groups—and there's eight or ten of them scattered all over the country—will die too." The big Irishman drew himself up. "He's bluffing, but these fools can't see that, and they want to play safe. Well, they've got the elevator, and they've got guns. We've got six men and a barricade across the hall that no bullet will go through. Greg and Ames and I built that. It's the only way they can get in, and we've got to hold that."

"What about the board?" Ben Wilson's voice was cool and even. "The cut-over isn't finished yet."

Hill's eyes jerked to O'Day's face. "Can you hold them off? I can finish that job."

"Yes," Theta said quickly, "and I can help."

"We'll try." O'Day turned back to the door. "We might have to shoot, but we won't shoot to kill. As long as they don't know that, we might have a chance."

The doorway to De Spain's office was almost directly across the hall from the doorway of the conference room. Bullets clanged off the barricade and whispered over their heads as they ran, crouched low, from one room to the other.

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DE SPAIN'S third message came thirty minutes later. "You have two hours left in which to decide. Two hours of life unless you surrender. Your death will not be pleasant—I promise you that—for this is the deadliest fluid ever known, and the gas it generates wipes out life at the faintest breath."

Ben Wilson's, "Check twelve," came softly through Hill's headset. Hill's hands moved automatically while bitter thought ran deep within him.

"He *is* bluffing!" Theta's lips trembled and her face was pale, but her words were crisp and sure. "I *know* he's bluffing now!"

Hill pushed the earphones away from his ears. "How do you know?"

"I've been here since the Ark was planned. There is no way that he could put a gas into the ventilating system from where he is. He has explosive up there, and it's just possible that he has a gas, but he can't use it."

"You're sure?"

"Yes."

"I'll finish this job. You tell Brian what you just told me. He can use the cut-in, and talk to the mob through the horns. You're sure there's no way we can keep your father from using the speaker system?"

"Not without cutting through thirty feet of solid rock."

"We'll have to play it this way then. Scoot!"

She was back almost at once and then Brian's voice roared out of the speaker horns as she stooped to help him. "You heard what De Spain said about gas. That's the weapon he says is the deadliest ever devised. And it's a weapon he can't use for there's no way he can get that gas into the ventilating system. We know he is bluffing, and we aren't going to surrender. Surrender means the life of too many people. There are several hundred men and women who have come through the heat, and who have every right to live. We're fighting for them—we'll go on fighting for them!"

Like an echo came De Spain's words: "You may believe Brian O'Day if you wish. You may believe him and die. His speech is colored by his desire, and not by truth. I can and will do exactly as I have promised."

The headphones said: "Check eighteen."

O'Day stooped beside Hill an hour later. "They've tried everything but grenades and gas. Thank God for the torch; we welded the barricade—ten sheets of Omicron—to both walls. It's too high for them to rush. There's a chance."

Hill didn't look up. "We're just about done. Be with you in a minute."

"Right. I'll see you in the other room."

Doctor Barclay was waiting when they crossed the hall. He came toward them with a steaming cup in each hand. "Drink this," he said, "you need it."

Hill thanked him with his eyes. He drained the cup and then stepped over to the control board. "The cutover's done, Ben. Anything else?"

"Nothing but time. Twenty-three minutes and twelve seconds and then we slow the first bank of dynamos."

The speaker horns bellowed. "You have thirty-one minutes left in which to decide."

Steven Hill joined O'Day and Gregory and Ames behind the barricade in the tight silence that followed the announcement. Then the bull voice shattered the quiet.

"O'Day! We want to talk to Brian O'Day!"

O'Day was rising when Hill caught his arm. "It might be a trap, Brian. Don't get your head over the top of the barricade."

"I don't think so. That's Charlie Haas yellin'. I'd take his word. . . . Well, there's no use takin' chances." He threw back his head to shout. "This is O'Day, Haas. What do you want?"

"We want you guys to walk out of there with your hands up. We're surrendering an' you're in the way. You ain't goin' to get us killed just because. . . ."

"We're here, Haas, and we're staying here. You can surrender if you want to, but don't try to pass this barricade!"

"We've got Peter Paul, guy. You sent him to the rooms on the lower level, remember? Well, we got him! That puts it right up to you. Walk out of there or your kid gets it!"

The icy voice of the horns: "You have nineteen minutes in which to vacate 'A' Level or die."

O'Day's face was a white, thin-lipped mask. "He couldn't," he breathed. "Haas couldn't kill Peter Paul!"

"Listen," Hill said, "maybe if you and I walked out, De Spain would let the rest live."

Sweat streaked O'Day's face. "You know better than that, Steve. Haas must

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be bluffing. He couldn't be low enough to do a thing like that. Anyway.... There's Peter Paul's life on one side, and the eight hundred or a thousand still alive outside the Ark on the other. He's just a boy. I couldn't. . . ."

"O'Day!" The big voice rang down the hall. "What're you goin' to do, O'Day? Make up your mind, guy, you ain't got much time!"

"Make it three minutes. I want to call De Spain on the Inter-Level phone."

"Right, guy, you got three minutes."

O'DAY slipped away through the door. Hill remembered Haas then. A big, smiling good-natured man.

Brian O'Day moved slowly, jerkily, when he came back. His eyes seemed to have receded deep into his skull, and the lines that bracketed his mouth were harsher. "I asked De Spain if he'd put the world back on its orbit and let us walk out of here and try to reach one of the other settlements. He said no. Then I asked him if he'd let the people outside live, and do whatever he liked with us. He said no again."

No one moved or spoke.

"Time's up, O'Day!" Haas called.

Slowly then, like an old man, Brian O'Day got to his feet.

"I thought you were a man, Charlie. I didn't think you'd drag a boy into your fight."

Haas didn't answer, but the hatchet-faced man who was bent over the machine gun spat thin words. "Why not? It's your life against ours, and we ain't goin' to die!"

"What have you decided, Brian?" It was Haas' taut voice.

"You have the boy?"

"Yes." Haas turned, spoke to one of the men behind him. "Show him the boy."

The horns roared: "Ten minutes!"

O'Day waited, head thrust forward, his bleak eyes raking the men who faced him. Those men split then, and a man in the white coveralls of a mechanic led Peter Paul O'Day to the front of the group. "Here he is."

The boy had been crying. His light voice carried bell-clear through the quiet.

"Dad! Why don't they let me come down there? Dad, what are they going to do?"

"Make up your mind, guy!" The hatchet-faced man was snarling.

"Dad! What are they. . . .?"

Haas asked, "Which way, Brian?"

O'Day shook himself like a sleepwalker coming awake. His hand went out.

A startled curse ripped the hot quiet. Peter Paul twisted away from the mechanic's grip, and slipped under Haas' out-stretched arms. Someone yelled: "Grab him!" Haas took two running steps, slipped, and crashed heavily against the hatchet-faced gunner.

Hatchet-Face squalled. The gun barrel yawed wildly, and pale flame spouted from the muzzle. Twenty feet down the hall the boy slowed oddly in mid-stride; took two short steps while the shrill, small cry burst from his lips. The echo of that cry was still ringing in O'Day's ears when the boy fell.

Brian's hands caught the top of the barricade. Haas was running, his face an ashen, twitching mask. He reached the boy as Brian O'Day vaulted the barricade, and he was turning when the Irishman arrived. Frantic words spilled from his lips.

"It was an accident, Brian. You saw that. Hell, we wouldn't hurt the kid. The whole thing was a bluff. We wanted to get you out of there. The kid ran, and I fell over the machine gun—the ricochet got him."

The Irishman said: "Get out of the way!"

O'Day was on his knees, bending over the boy's limp figure. "Gone," he said flatly. "Gone."

The Irishman got the boy tenderly in his arms, stood up. "You aren't to blame, none of you are," he said. "This is just one more murder De Spain's responsible for."

Haas said: "You think De Spain's bluffin', huh?"

"Right."

"If you're wrong. . . ."

"We'll die if I'm wrong, but if I'm right all the poor devils who came through the heat will have a chance to live."

Haas' eyes clung to the small still figure in O'Day's arms. "I—I guess we'll play it your way, Brian. God knows we've messed it up enough now!"

The horns bellowed: *"Four minutes!"*

Haas' ashen face jerked up and his eyes went wide. "You, De Spain, you can go to hell!"

Steven Hill was waiting at the barricade, and he took the boy's still figure in his arms while the Irishman climbed the barricade. Then O'Day said, "I'll take him, Steve. I'll take him in here."

They watched him carry the boy into

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what had once been De Spain's office.

Hill's dark gaze was locked on O'Day's big body. The Irishman was standing beside a couch. His face might have been carved from gray stone.

Gregory touched Hill's arm. "Let's get out of here! Let's go in by the control desk. God, he must be made of ice. If he'd only yell . . . if he'd swear or sock somebody! You'd—you'd think he was. . . ." Gregory stumbled away.

The horns said: *"Three minutes!"*

AT the control desk Ben Wilson said: "Five seconds. Three seconds. Now!" He pushed a tiny switch home as the second hand on the wall clock flicked straight up. Hundreds of feet below them, on the dynamo level, a rack of huge switches hissed and spat yellow flame. One row of the giant dynamos slowed, and their high-pitched whine died to a low moan.

"As simple as that," Wilson said, "Now just one switch each day, a month and the world is back on its orbit."

The horns said: *"Two minutes!"*

Brian O'Day was standing in the doorway, his face frozen in that horrible mask. "You're stayin' here, all of you."

"What do you mean?" Hill asked.

"This is my job. I've earned it, and I'm going to do it. De Spain will come out of that rat hole; he'll play his bluff all the way. Maybe it isn't a bluff, but he'll play his cards out. I'm going to be waiting for him."

O'Day closed the door carefully, went down three steps and across the hall. He moved not slowly, but with the unhurried step of a man who covers familiar ground.

Once inside De Spain's office he turned and closed and carefully bolted the thick door. His bootheels thudded into the soft carpet as he crossed to the round stand against the wall and took two of the X-bombs out of the compartment there.

The horns said: *"The time is up!"*

O'Day drew himself up and waited, and in that thick silence he could count the beat of his heart, could hear the slow sound of his own breathing. He dropped one of the X-bombs in his jacket pocket, cupped the other in his hand.

The click as the heavy door opened might have been the brazen clang of a giant clock.

Sound came to meet him. The quick striking of boots against the metal floor, the hiss of hurried breathing. He saw De Spain's legs first, then the white blouse, and the odd machine he carried. De Spain stopped, and their eyes met.

O'Day's voice was toneless, cold. "You came," he said: "you had to come. You had to play out your hand."

"You haven't a chance in the world of ever getting out of here alive." De Spain's green eyes were glowing. He moved the fat, glass-barreled machine in his arms.

O'Day took one slow step toward him. Another. "Look at the lounge against the wall. You had your way! Peter Paul *didn't* stay in the Ark. You killed him."

"This is the deadliest weapon ever made." The glass snout swung toward O'Day.

O'Day's face stayed coldly masklike. He came on slowly, surely, like a deathless machine. "Your ego won't let you admit you're through, won't let you stop. You played God, De Spain, and. . . ."

De Spain's mouth twitched. He jerked back, threw the glass and metal machine full at O'Day. It hit his shoulder, and blinding pain flowed like water down his side. There was no break in his stride, no change in his expression.

De Spain pawed at the front of his blouse. Gun steel shone in his hand. Pale flame spat from the muzzle. O'Day staggered, and bright scarlet stained his jacket. His hands came together and there was a sharp *click* as he twisted the two halves of the X-bomb.

"Damn you!" De Spain stumbled backward.

O'Day was counting. "One. Two." He took two quick steps and his hand caught De Spain's blouse, pulled him close. De Spain screamed and jammed the gun snout hard against O'Day's chest.

The Irishman was falling, but his grip on De Spain's blouse never slackened. He pulled him closer, and held the ticking X-bomb tight between them where it was in contact with the second bomb. Some cool and distant part of his mind counted: "Three!"

O'Day said: "Judgment day!" and blood came out of his mouth with the words. He knew suddenly that he was smiling for the first time in months.

The thought, the smile, stayed with him while the world vanished in rocking blackness. Then he was striding, tall and strong, away from all pain toward a great white light that went on forever.

(Continued on page 112)

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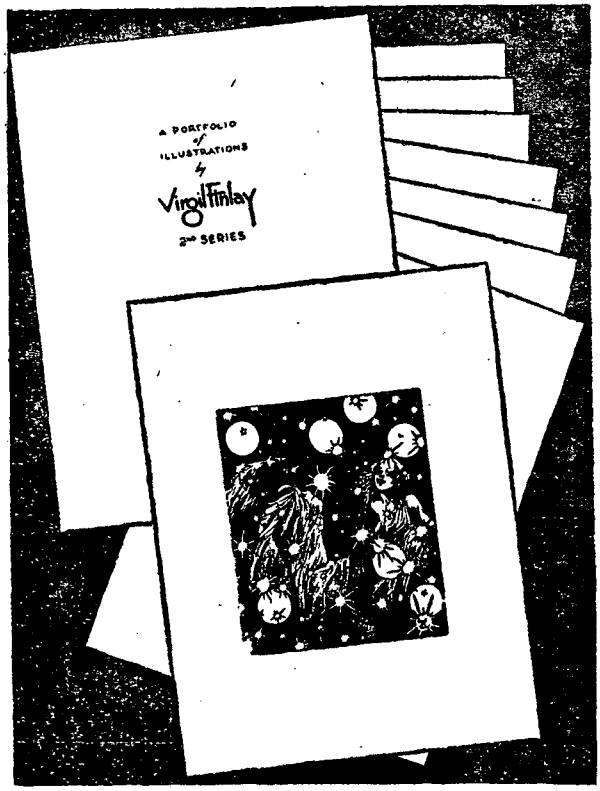
It's Ready, Fans!



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CHAPTER XXVII

OUT OF THE ARK

ALL four of the great doors of the surface hangars were open when Steven Hill left the Flight Office. It was still dark outside—a velvet, starless dark—and only a few of the hangar wall panels glowed with the soft light. A score of the big bombers waited, in rows of four, near the doors.

Charlie Haas' white coveralled figure came out of the gloom. "They're all ready, sir. Food, water, first-aid supplies, portable lighting plants. Was there anything else you could think of, sir?"

"That's all, Charlie, except this." Hill's hand went out to the big man's shoulder. "I'm not your superior. We've all got a job to do, that's all, and we're all doing it. Sooner or later we'll have to plan some sort of government but now there's too much work to be done. Forget that sir stuff."

"Right." The big man swallowed. "You—you ain't holdin' that about the—the boy against me?"

"Did O'Day?"

"He said he didn't but. . . ."

"He didn't, Charlie, and neither do I. You're doing a swell job on the planes now."

The big man said, "Thanks, Steve," in a choked voice and turned blindly away.

Hill walked on past the planes, his heels striking hollow echoes from the hangar floor. There was still a half hour until dawn, an hour before the ships took off. He moved out into the cool darkness.

"Steve!"

The husky, remembered voice brought a tightness to Hill's throat. He came around to find Theta's slender, white-clad figure beside him. A shadow lay across the golden oval of her face, but her eyes were shining.

"You here, Theta?"

"I had to come; I had to talk to you. Steve, there wasn't—wasn't any pain. . . . I mean that they—they both died instantly?"

"There couldn't have been any pain, Theta. Neither your father nor Brian knew when the end came. The explosion was too swift."

"I'm glad." Her eyes pulled away from his face. "I wasn't sure, and I had to know." Her shoulders drooped. "I—I guess I'd better go back."

"Wait," Hill said, and his hand went out to her arm. "This is the nicest time of day. We've got an hour; we can climb the hill and. . . ."

"And see the sunrise." Her head was tilted back, and the soft glow of the hangar lights struck glints from her hair.

He nodded wordlessly, and then, hand in hand, they climbed the path to the hilltop.

They stood there for a long moment in silence, and then he said, "You knew what I was going to say. How?"

"Penny liked the sunrise, too," she said breathlessly. "Remember? You told me about her in—in the lounge when we were watching the last newscasts."

Far across the hills the first fingers of light probed the dark sky. More than ever he was conscious of her nearness, of the warmth of her hand.

"She was a grand girl, Penny." He kept his glance on the distant sky. "One of the best. And Jay was a fine man. They're gone—like the rest—only a few thousands remain out of the millions who once peopled the earth. We've got to rebuild."

"We will, all of us. But we've got to remember. We've got to keep their memories bright. They've got to live with us always in our hearts. Penny and Jay. . . ."

His voice joined hers. "And Brian and Peter Paul. . . ."

He kissed her then, and her lips were sweet and warm against his. They stood there, arm in arm, while the sun came up with a rush.

"Remember?" she whispered. "*May you live forever* . . . . They will live forever!" The husky lilt in her voice made it almost a song.

The purple shadows lay deep against the hills. It seemed then that there were four figures there, always there. Penny, smiling and gay, who carried her laughter like a bright shield; Jay Forbes, whose grin flashed white and crinkled the skin around his eyes. Two others. Dark-haired, blue-eyed, laughing. A man and boy who were alike but for size.

They turned, those four, and moved with the shadows. They smiled and beckoned, and strode ahead of Steven Hill and Theta De Spain as they moved wordlessly eastward toward the glory that flamed in the sky.

The End

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The Editor's Page

AT THIS time it is only natural that there should be a lot of speculation as to the present and future aims and policies of FAMOUS FANTASTIC MYSTERIES. With the sale of the Munsey publications to a house which has been a leader in a fight against reprints in general, some modification of policy was, of course, to be expected. The future running plan of this book may be stated briefly as follows:

> FAMOUS FANTASTIC MYSTERIES will publish only new stories of exceptional quality or stories which have never before appeared in magazine form. (Please see footnote on page 114, regarding "Into the Infinite.")

In our opinion, this change, far from diminishing the quality of the book, should infinitely improve it. Where before we were restricted to an ever diminishing inventory of old Munsey classics, we now have the fantastic lore of the world from which to choose. The next issue, for example, will feature John Taine's great classic "The Iron Star," in our opinion one of the most outstanding imaginative fantasies ever written. And while it is too early to go into details, we are negotiating for magazine rights to an English fantasy novel for which a lot of you have been clamoring for a long time.

FAMOUS FANTASTIC MYSTERIES pledges to its readers the same high quality of classics that it has given them in the past, the same scrupulous fidelity in reproducing them, the same outstanding art work by the same craftsmen. If by so doing we can make this magazine truly the golden book of fantasy, a book to be kept and treasured with other great literature that has been written in this field, we will have considered our mission well worth the labor.

Our heartfelt thanks to our readers for their loyal and most co-operative support!

Mary Gnaedinger

EDITOR

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Into the Infinite*

By Austin Hall

Conclusion

Titanic forces poise themselves for the final struggle to possess the Rebel Soul. Will the strange secret of his being now reveal itself in the clash of the loosed lightnings?

AFTER his adventures with George Witherspoon, the Rebel Soul, Walter Warren became a prosperous banker, and lived happily with his wife and Roselle.

The Master, the leader of the Order of Sevens, told Walter that George had become an internationally famous criminal, and was known as "The King of Thieves." But he was sure that, unmoral and unfettered by man-made laws as he was, George had a great power for good in his nature, unknown and unearthly powers for either good or evil. The Master received Walter's promise of assistance in redeeming him.

The Rebel Soul seemed to be following his evil genius when he kidnaped Roselle, married her and took her abroad. But he was more than good to her and she loved him with unflagging devotion, in spite of the supernatural powers which he showed in outwitting and despoiling all of those whom he wished to fool or surpass. She clung to the idea that he had never harmed a helpless person, and that her love would make him finally an all-powerful benefactor of humanity rather than a superlative force of evil.

All the evil in George Witherspoon's life was personified in a small malignant being who avowedly meant to spoil Roselle's life and plans, and who had some mysterious covenant with the Rebel Soul. At last, in a strange mansion in America, Walter, the Master, and Wilkins, the detective, join forces to grapple with the Thing of Evil itself.

CHAPTER XLV

THE DUEL

INDEED it would be just that—a duel. I don't know just the exact meaning that the term is meant to imply; but it was surely to the point and suggestive.

It was a sort of climax backward. Wilkins had been wrought to a high state of excitement; our gruesome adventure underneath had been just what he was after—he was getting action. It was his purpose to capture this one who was the whole crux of the mystery and bring him bound and tied, to the Master. The danger was but spice to the adventure. And he was forestalled. He was disappointed.

We stood in the doorway. The other two did not notice us a whit, or if they did, they did not betray it. It was impossible to come upon them without a halt of wonder. It was an imaginative conception portrayed in the flesh of the living.

I had read many speculations concerning the good and evil that is mankind, of double personalities, of the teachings of religions—that man is between two forces: God and the devil—but never did I expect to encounter the two abstract philosophies face to face, personified in the forms of men. But it was so. One was everything that the other wasn't. Good and evil. Love and undying hatred; the hope and the negation of humanity.

In the contrast the Master was great with unlimited effulgence. We had always loved him; there was ever something in him of the future, he was so devoid of evil. He was as high in the plane of virtue as the other was low in the depths of evil. It was a picture to hold the eye and mind; of the two great forces, of the opposite jinn of mankind come in conflict.

The Master was reading. That, as I remember, was the strangest part of it all. Apparently he was absolutely unconscious of the other. Even when he looked

*In the future FAMOUS FANTASTIC MYSTERIES will feature either new stories, or stories which have appeared only in book form. In deference, however, to the thousands of readers who have been following "Into the Infinite" we have included the final instalment in this issue.

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Whose gold? Whose but Death's?

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across the table, square in the other's face, he seemed not to see him. His eyes never lost their soft, mellow expression; there was not the flicker of emotion, not the slightest flexing of a muscle. How different was the other!

It was Roselle who had named him the Thing of Evil. And he was just that. He was everything that I would hate to be; a nightmare of human flesh and action. He was evil, evil intense, and of a greatness unparalleled. There was something about him that threw one back into memory; that roused certain deadly animal emotions. He was carnal, without spirit, deadly and alluring.

Alluring? It seems a crime to say it, but it was so. One could not behold him without a certain weakening, a surrender, a desire to do I know not what. Had it not been for the presence of the Master I would have been doubly frightened. Perhaps, too, it was the real, hard, material voice of Wilkins beside me that reassured me.

"Old Nick himself!" he was saying.

And I caught sight of his blue-barreled automatic. I really believe he would have used it had it not been for the Master. The old man looked up and with an almost imperceptible change of expression flashed a message to the detective. The latter subsided and put the weapon in his pocket.

It was a duel. The strangest duel, perhaps, that man has ever witnessed. And it had one element that has been true since man's beginning—the evil was on the aggressive. From its chair opposite the Master it was ever lifting up, its lips breathing silent imprecations, its eyes scintillating like flame. It was terrible and unholy, and yet withal it was strangely impotent.

The Master went on with his reading.

The thing writhed with exasperation. It could not get started. Whatever its power, it was impotent before the Master. It was cringing, it was defiant, it was helpless!

Perhaps it understood. Here was one who could defy all the subtle arts of the devil. Its nose was white and twitching; its hands clinching; and then—

I saw it. I would have screamed. The Master looked over calmly. It had drawn a knife and was just in the act of hurling it across the table. The arm was partly raised when it was arrested by the nonchalant glance of the Master. The weapon fell upon the carpet. Never was such a strange duel beheld by mankind.

But at this instant there was an interruption, a silent impinging intuition of a thing approaching. The static air was broken. Something—I could feel it—someone. I looked up at the door on the opposite side of the room, and I saw it.

It was George Witherspoon!

The Thing of Evil is such a nightmare that I loathe to pen it. It is terrible, almost supernatural. But if the one was supernatural so was the other, and as beautiful as the other ugly.

Whatever was George Witherspoon, he was a conception of beauty attained to its utmost. He was ever twenty, with the utmost perfection of physical proportion. Somehow one could not think of him as evil; he gave one the impression too much of perfection.

I was not disappointed.

He stood still but a moment. He was smiling. There was laughter in his eyes. He glanced over at the Master. Even in that one glance I could catch admiration. I really think he loved him.

Then he stepped forward. What he did was unexpected.

He plucked the evil one by the ear. There was no resisting; the thing cringed and whimpered, but he obeyed like a recreant schoolboy. It was the work of but an instant. Wilkins and I were brushed aside. With a quick movement the Thing was thrust forward. George locked the door. And I heard Wilkins say:

"Yea, you betcha. He minds *Mephisto*."

THE whole affair was surprising. The afternoon's adventures had come to a strange and unexpected culmination. It was inexplicable. Instead of clearing, the mystery was getting darker. It had grown threefold. There was an affinity between them, something I could not fathom.

But one thing was certain: George Witherspoon was the master; this one incident proved it beyond all question. Certainly there was something between him and the Master. I reflected that they had been for some days in long consultations. It is not likely that all their conversations had to do with the Chinese of the ancients. The Master would not turn from his purpose, and his purpose was George Witherspoon and his secret.

The Master raised his eyes from his book. He was not perturbed a whit by the sudden interruption. He watched it with calm interest. When the other had

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locked the door and turned, he spoke quietly:

"Give me the key, George."

It was placed on the table.

"Very well."

The old man arose, stepped over very quietly and unlocked it.

"You know what you are doing, Master? I have warned you. You are playing with death."

The old man smiled softly.

"Very well. So be it. Life or death."

George Witherspoon bowed. In a moment he was gone.

Things had now come to such a pass that I was determined on some sort of an explanation. And so was Wilkins. If the Master knew, it was no more than right that he should tell us. Who was this strange monster—and what was this one, all light and genius? I was positive that he knew something. We asked him.

The Master nodded kindly, and I think his eyes twinkled.

"Very well, Walter, it may be true. Perhaps you are right. But let me ask you: Have you looked in that mirror yonder?" He glanced quizzically at Wilkins, who was covered with soot and cobwebs. "Is it not possible that you yourself have something to tell the Master? You are wounded." He rose softly and examined my ear. "Only a flesh wound. Tell me, Walter, of your adventures."

So I told him. He listened eagerly. I related it all from the beginning, turning to Wilkins for corroboration.

"And who is this little monster with whom you were sitting," I asked, interrupting myself before he had finished.

"Ah," said the Master, "that I can tell you. Perhaps you know already. He is the one who carried George Witherspoon to the mountain."

"The purchaser of his soul?"

"Exactly."

"Then," I said, "I quit. He is nothing but the devil. I shall believe with Wilkins."

The Master smiled.

"Please go on with your story. How were you wounded perhaps—"

And so we related the rest. Of our entrance to the tower, our search, and the discovery of the passage, of the gold and the fearful thing that had struck me in the dark, and finally the pursuit that had brought us here.

The Master considered. I think that what we said inclined him to his former theories.

"You found this gold, you say?"

"Millions."

"Millions? That is well." He closed the book that was before him; and there was finality in his tone. "I think, Walter, that I can promise you a solution. The case is drawing to a close. And now, gentlemen, you had better have a good bath and something to eat."

Of that there was no question, we both of us were very dirty. We rose to go, but the Master stopped us.

"One word, gentlemen. Perhaps it is just as well that you know that tomorrow we shall be alone in the House of Silence. George Witherspoon is to leave us, and we shall be left to fight for our own salvation. I wish to warn you. If you come into one of these rooms and discover myself and our friend up yonder in a sort of silent conversation do not disturb us. And let me ask you finally and fervently not to be alarmed. Have faith in the Master. That is all."

And so it ended, our interview with the Master, and the escapades of the afternoon. It was as usual, the real was the unreal, and our adventures ending in nothing.

When I thought back I could not but note the absolute contrariness of events. We had drifted, not pursued; we had followed one event after another, and in the end we had found nothing. In the first place we had set out to discover the strange musician and had found only deeper mystery. We had pried our way into the tower, and we had lost him. Then the passage, the gold, the thing in the darkness, the pursuit, the north tower, the scene in the study-room, the advent of George Witherspoon, and lastly our interview with the Master.

It had been an afternoon of surprises, with never a one explained. Most of all, and what was the most humiliating, we had at the end of it all been dismissed like schoolboys. I had sought some satisfaction from the Master, and instead had yielded myself into doing most of the talking.

Not that I cared. I had implicit confidence in his wisdom, but I did have a little pride, and was beginning to feel that the time was at hand when I should be taken more into his counsel.

And Wilkins. He had been all for action, grim and certain. He was going to finish this thing with his brawn and muscle. Had he been left alone and allowed to have his way, one person in

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the House of Silence would now be lying on his back with a lead bullet in his head. It was hard for him to understand the weird, subtle course of the Master. He was hard and practical; and it was no easy matter to abnegate thirty years of training even after the reading of "Faust" for three nights in the House of Silence. Though he had gone to the tip of the arc of superstition Wilkins still had great respect for steel, even when dealing with the supernatural.

BUT was it supernatural? Somehow I kept repeating the question, not audibly, to be sure, but in my mind. I had the Master's reiterated assurance that it was not; and my own reason told me the same, but if it was not supernatural, what else could it be? There was something epicene about this Thing of Evil; something sexless, as of a thing out of body—human, to be sure, but with an extreme distortion; of great and unholy wisdom and fascination.

Fascination! No word was ever coined that could describe it. It was not hypnosis, but something far above it. One could almost feel that here was a great and unholy spirit, clinging to a decayed and worthless body; a great soul that had been perverted.

The Master would have no violence. From the very first he had warned against all killing; he had ever a faith in more subtle ways of fighting. He would have no police and no material interference. And I knew that he was right. There was something at the bottom of it all that must not be shattered by a physical interruption. I realized it, and so did Wilkins, who very aptly specified it when we came to dinner.

"Well," he said, "I came very near spilling the beans."

Wilkins was forever using absurd expressions, but he had a way of getting more out of them than I could derive out of pure authorized English.

"What beans?" I asked.

"Why, the beans, the whole pot and porridge. I can't forget that I'm a human being. I've been trained to follow my man and pin him down when I get him. In this case it would have done no good. The Master does not wish to destroy the deck until he has found the joker."

"And this monster is the joker?" I asked.

"No, he's part of the deck. The Master wishes his secret."

"But will he get it?" I asked, knowing well what would be the answer.

"Get it? Get it? Say, now will he? Leave it to the Master. He's a fox that would make a stone dog wag his tail. It's going to be some battle."

"Then you think that there will be a fight, after all?"

"Yep. Up here." He pointed to his forehead. "These two old birds are going to have a thinkfest; a private shenanigan of their own, the high-brow heavyweight championship of the world. And Johnny Wilkins is going to be the official timekeeper."

"You wish to imply by that, I presume, that they are about to enter into some sort of duel of hypnosis; some crucial test of the subjective."

Wilkins bit into his cigar.

"Yes," he answered, "I think so—I suppose that's the Latin for what I was saying. A sort of devil's ping-pong. They're going to eat out of the same soup-ladle. And I'm going to be there to see that there is no hitting in the clinches, no slugging below the belt. It's going to be a fight to the finish, with clean breakaways."

I have no familiarity with the nomenclature of pugilism. There has ever been, in me, an element of abhorrence in these bestial exhibitions of brutality. I was essentially gentle in my nature. When we were children I refrained from the contests that required the skill and strength of mere brute muscle. It was George Witherspoon who enjoyed them. He would, even as a child, journey across the town to witness a fight. He was enthusiastic for contest, for wrestling, boxing; sports that to me seem to be brutally wicked. I have even reason to suspect that under assumed names he sometimes stepped inside the roped arena, or whatever it is they call it.

However, I am not entirely ignorant of the thrill of conflict. I have played golf, and I can understand the excruciating excitement of a close contest, and I can appreciate, too, the inestimable value of chivalric honor and fairness. Even if I was not familiar with all the expressions of the ring I could gather that Wilkins had delegated to himself the duty of arbiter in case of unfairness. He was like a great loving, watchful mastiff where the Master was concerned.

He took out his blue automatic and placed it on the table; likewise two extra loaded clips.

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"Yes," he said, "that is the job for Wilkins. The Master has the brains and the wisdom. I am going to let him play his own game. At this kind of business a worldly detective can only bungle. But I can watch, and, if necessary, when the time comes I can do a bit of shooting. Old Black Eyes is going to put nothing over on the Master."

For all of his roughness Wilkins was a splendid man. I was grateful; the presence of the detective would relieve my apprehension considerably. I wished no harm to come to the Master.

CHAPTER XLVI

A BATTLE OF TITANS

THERE are certain inner springs of thinking that are beyond scientific explanations. Premonitions and intuitions. The learning of all our wise men has never been able to explain the baffling exactness of our subconscious prescience. That night, when I retired, I experienced a strange anticipation for what might be impending. I had a feeling of lightness, but at the same time an alternation of spirits that was depressing. I had no way of knowing, but I somehow felt that we were approaching the crisis, that the next few days were promising a final series of developments.

What these would be I had, of course, no way of foreseeing. Nevertheless, I was so positive and my mind was in such a swirl of excitement that it was hours before I could sleep. And even when I did it was only to fall into turbulent, tumultuous dreaming, to find myself in a fantom land of stalking shadows where impossible things happened, where everything was upside down and depressing, and where I was but an infinitesimal speck among numberless thousands. It was perhaps not more than a reflex of the realities through which I was passing. Certainly there was not any great demarcation between the two illusions. One was as unusual as the other.

In the morning, when I descended to the dining-room, I once again found myself alone. Wilkins had been before me. His new occupation left him no leisure for my company or conversation. The sturdiness of his nature, once started, held to his task with the tenacity of a bulldog. He would not leave the Master. He was a bodyguard with the faithfulness of a mastiff.

As might be conjectured it was near the library that I found him. One glance through the open door disclosed the Master, sitting, as usual, by the massive oaken table and reading with the same imperturbability that was such an essential of his nature. Wilkins was in a room close by, where he could see every nook and cranny of the library. He, too, was reading, but with an effort that was perceptible and amusing. It was a great heavy tome, whose impressive and somber binding was a sort of exterior index to its contents.

I nodded.

"Is it interesting, Mr. Wilkins?"

His eyes had a strange, gray color as he replied.

"It is. That is, it will be if I can find out what it is about. I was just trying to get a trace to the Master's wisdom. But I guess I will have to pass it up. It's too much like a heavy bombardment. The words are so long that by the time my brain has waded into the pronunciation it's too overloaded to grasp the meaning. It's too high for a flatbrow like Wilkins. Guess I'll have to go back to *Mother Goose* and *Mephisto*."

"And this strange one, the one you call his nibs?" I asked.

"You mean 'Little Black Eyes'?" he answered, at the same time pointing to his automatic reposing by the volume. "Oh, yes, he has been here. They played the first set-off this morning."

"Played?"

"Well, that's what you might call it. It's some sort of competition. Evidently Little Black Eyes doesn't like the Master."

"What did he do?"

"Do? I don't know as he did anything, but it is evident that he isn't a sluggard. If he aimed as many faces, and shook as many fists, and looked at me as he did at the Master, he would have me climbing for the dog star."

"And the Master?"

"Oh, he doesn't seem to mind it. Rather, he seems to enjoy it; he just goes on reading. He has a fine system of defense, has the Master."

"How do you account for it?"

"I didn't, exactly, but I've a theory. From the looks of it, the Master has a sort of finesse at this devil's ping-pong. He plays with system. He's no amateur like the other, and I think he has got his goat."

"But suppose this evil one should re-

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sort to violence?" I asked him anxiously.

"Little Black Eyes? Then—well, about then little Blue Bird will sing a little song."

He tapped his automatic, and I had not a single doubt that he meant to use it.

IN THE afternoon I returned to the library. Now that this strange duel was on it was almost impossible to stay alone in the building. I was sensitive to strange fears and trepidations; the silence which before had been so suggestive was now even more ominous in its intensity, its vacuumlike stillness soul-tearing and destructive. Its total lack of sound was hysteria, a static inertness that bordered on to death itself. Worst of all was the climax, the mysterious paradox of silence into sound; hair-raising, like the rushing out of souls on a vacuum whirlwind.

I could not be alone. Even the library with its strange occupants and its duel of the occult was a merry crowd beside the rest of the house. I must have company.

As in the morning I found Wilkins in the side room, sitting at the table with the little Blue Bird automatic still before him. But this time he was not reading.

Far from it. He was alert, and as stiff as a ramrod; there was that to his tense, strong body of a crouching leopard; his face was set, and it seemed to me that he was scarcely breathing. One hand he held alert over the embossed butt of the Blue Bird.

I closed the door softly. The very posture of the detective was enough. The static tensity of the atmosphere was magnetic, an irresistible lure of a thousand forces. There was something incessant, like the unceasing waves upon solid walls of granite. I stepped to a chair beside the table. Wilkins elevated a warning finger.

There was not a sound; and yet to my excited imagination it was like all the conflict and unloosed tumult of bedlam. One reeled at the contact, the air was charged with unseen scintillations.

I was afraid. I would have gone back, but I could not. Something held me, whether I would or no, to the seat by the side of Wilkins. I will not define it, for to do so would take me into that which I know not. I can only say that it was so.

My eyes were drawn as by a lode-stone through the open door into the library. The table, the scattered parchments, the Master, and the Thing of Evil. The whole view was as in a vision—the rising corridors of books, the great swinging doors of the library, and beyond the full sweep of the splendid stairway. I was as tense as Wilkins. I, too, would have liked to have an automatic.

Truly it was a duel of the occult. The very vibrations told of the strength of Titans. These two old men, so physically frail, were in terrible conflict. I know not how it was, nor what the forces, but I could sense it. And most of all it was evil. Whatever this black one was he was trying to beat down the Master.

It was not strength of muscle. At that he would have been as inept as the frailest insect. He was old; so old, that he had passed beyond the suggestion of flesh and manhood; he was decrepit, aged, feeble, weak, and yet endowed with the strength of thousands. He was unearthly. It was his eyes. They were his all—his being, the searing weapons of an intellect unlimited and evil. And they flamed at the Master.

Never was there such a contrast. It was as if the double nature of man had been separated and divided, driven to utmost extremes of good and evil, and then suddenly brought together. It was a battle that was epic, and allegory personified in action. Never shall I forget the Master.

One cannot look upon extremes without vivid recollections. I would that all the good that is in man would center and grow into the culmination that was the Master. It was fearless, white, spotless, irresistible, and it was calm. As I looked upon these two, so allegorical, my mind lost the sense of their materiality. They were not mere men; but the two prime essences of man's emotions—love and hatred.

And they had come into conflict, a conflict that was weird and impossible and could not be, and yet was for all that the greatest one that can be conceived of. Is it possible that one can destroy the other, and that man be all love or hatred? What right have we for such extremes of good and evil?

But there was no violence. The Master was all nonchalance. Never once did he stop his reading or betray by the slightest quiver that he was even remotely conscious of the other's presence. If the

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other was evil he ignored him; he did not deign to notice him; he would not even allow that he was existent. It was the most inexplicable and daring thing I have ever seen, as if he had relegated such a thing to the nonexistent.

Once he looked straight at him; but with the same eyes, unseeing. But it was the moment the other looked for. I gripped Wilkins, who in turn clutched the Blue Bird. The form had stiffened, then crouched and quivered with the alertness of a springing panther.

The Master did not move an eyelash. He calmly selected a piece of paper and went on with his reading. It was a tense moment. I was certain that something was about to happen. It did.

Exasperation drove the weird one into action. It sprang upon its feet. With a shrilling, piping snarl it ejaculated its snapping venom.

"They are mine! Mine! Mine!" it shouted. "You shall not have them! George Witherspoon, and Roselle—mine! Mine! All mine!"

With that it went tottering out of the room. The door of the north tower closed behind it.

Wilkins put down his automatic. He looked at me. His gray eyes were full of satisfaction as he nodded.

"End of round two," he said. "The Master coming strong; the other just a bit groggy."

That ended it for a time. In fact, after a little the Master arose and went down the stairs and out into the garden. From the window Wilkins and I could see him. He walked in and out among the lawns and roses, touching one now and then in a sort of tender abstraction. It is remarkable what gentleness such a one can have in his nature. There is an affinity between flowers and virtue. He was like a strolling meditation. Then he was out of sight; the last we saw of him was his black-robed figure turning off a driveway.

"Well, that ends that," said Wilkins. "These old boys take long intermissions, but when they get together they surely make the fuzz fly. It's sure some battle. Here's hoping it goes to a knock-out. Come, let's get a bite to eat."

Wilkins must have been an enthusiast on boxing. Down in the dining-room he enlarged on the spectacle we had just now witnessed. It took on to him a double meaning; he had a peculiar imagination and insisted on comparing the whole weird affair to an event in the most brutal of sports. I listened in a sort of whir to the laudations he bestowed upon the Master.

"Did you notice his haymaker, and that subtle defense, and the short arm? A corkscrew punch ain't in it with it! I have been a fan all my life; I miss none of them; but I never thought that I was some day to witness the highbrow championship of the world. And a ringside seat! I wouldn't sell it for a million!"

And so he went on.

It is really curious what a contrast there can be in the individuality of man's thinking. It was revolting to even speak so. It was impossible that I should connect the Master with anything so coarse and brutal. But for the sake of the respect that I had for the man's innate honesty I bore it until the meal was over. Then I, too, went into the garden.

CHAPTER XLVII

MORE MYSTERY

IT WAS good to be outside. Very often I would step out for a little walk along the pathways. Though somehow I never experienced any desire to leave the grounds, it was refreshing to be out in the sunlight, to see the water, the sky, and the white, modern city in the distance.

Just now I was seeking after the Master. It had come to me that the time was again opportune to question as to the future. I was afraid and had many and grave misgivings.

At last I located him. He was standing by the trim cypress-hedge that bordered the park. It seemed to me that he was talking; then that there was another, and that voices were softly commingled. But I could not distinguish. To come across him and not appear too insistent I took a bypath. I was too polite to intrude myself into a private conversation, but I considered that it was not at all but of good form to chance upon him accidentally.

My little detour led me about a clump of bushes. When I had passed them and was again in sight of the spot, he was gone. But of course this was nothing extraordinary. He had merely stepped down another bypath; to overtake him would take but a moment. But when I came to the hedge I halted.

I was curious, of a sudden, to discover

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with whom the Master had been talking. The cypress barrier was just low enough for me to see over it. An old man working with a hoe and weeding in a bed of roses. It was a place of much beauty, and from the lawns and park and proportions must have been the grounds of a home of one of considerable wealth. The house visible through the trees was a mansion of the early eighties, a sedate affair with the affable, genial atmosphere of one comfortable and happy. Somehow it struck me as the home of a scholar. The man did not see me. At length I spoke.

"Hello!"

I do not think that I spoke unusually loud, or that there was anything abrupt in my intonation. I had meant to greet and not to startle. But I did just that. The man dropped his hoe and then recovered it in stumbling fright and stepped, almost leaped, sidewise.

"Now wha' the divil may ye be!"

He was evidently a gardener; some faithful old servitor of the mansion. He glanced at me shrewdly.

"Excuse me," I said. "I was just saying how do you do."

There was something in his manner beyond mere startlement, something that bordered on fear. He was old and toothless and creased with wrinkles, his whole face, lips, and chin drawn up into a sort of pucker. He glared.

"How d' do, yourself," he answered, "an' wha' the divil be ye? And when ye be through with your how d' doing, be away with ye! Ye black h'athen."

Now, I had a black suit on, but my face is not at all black. Evidently the fellow could not see me, so I climbed up on a large stone to give him reassurance.

"Pardon me, my dear man, but evidently you are mistaken. I was just seeking information."

He surveyed me curiously from head to foot, and drew a cautious step nearer.

"An' ye are in an 'ell of a place to be looking for information. What bay ye doin' there—and ye're no h'athen?"

"And I am not black, either," I said.

"Maybe so, maybe so, but there's many a one that be. It's a bad place for Christians and I'm thinking."

"Can you tell me anything about the place?" I asked him.

But he glared in answer. His wrinkled mouth clinched together as if he had already spoken more than was good. I repeated the question. His answer was addressed more to himself than to me.

"Na, na," he said, "it is no good to be talking to the divil."

The old fellow was no doubt an eccentric, or some old servant full of superstition. Perhaps, too, he had seen that which excused him. It seemed to grieve him sorely to think that he had even spoken at all; for he continued to shake his head, and to watch me with a sort of fearful anticipation.

Again I asked him my question.

His answer was to place some tobacco between his gums and to continue glaring. I had never been aware that I necessitated such inspection.

"Come, come," I said, "I am a man like yourself. Do I look like a devil?"

It encouraged him at least to answer:

"Sure, sure, an' maybe ye be; but how do I know? It would not be the first lie the divil has told."

There seemed to be no way in getting about him. After all, I was looking for the Master.

"Was there an old man down here a few minutes ago?" I asked.

To my surprise he answered.

"You mean an elderly gintleman, a saint, with a silver beard? One who makes ye talk all ye know and mades ye like it? He was here just a few minutes ago."

"Does he come here often?"

"Aye, he does, to talk to Dr. Holcomb. Sometimes he condescends to talk to me. He's a very fine gintleman."

"Who is Dr. Holcomb?"

He lifted his implement and pointed toward the mansion. But—

"I am Dr. Holcomb."

A man stepped out from behind the shrubbery and introduced himself. He was one who, at first sight, would rightly be taken for a gentleman of honor, and a scholar.

"I am Dr. Holcomb, and you, I presume, are Mr. Warren."

We shook hands over the green cypress.

"I heard Joyce talking," he explained; "he was giving you some of his superstition. Joyce, my man," he said to the other, "are you so sure that Mr. Warren looks like the devil?"

"Begging your pardon, doctor, and how do I know?" the other answered. "'E could look that way as well as any other, could 'e not? I ain't taking no chances."

The doctor laughed.

"That will do, Joyce. I think we may risk it. You may go now."

Whatever the old man's opinions he

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The Thing of Evil was there to receive Roselle—as loathsome as a tarantula, and as terrible

did not stop to dispute further. He merely bestowed upon me a parting incredulous stare and toddled, mumbling, up the pathway.

"POOR old Joyce," said the doctor, when the man was at last out of sight. "It is almost impossible to persuade him to work on the side of the garden." He thought a minute. "Perhaps I should not insist. After all, I should have some consideration for his faithful service."

"Who is he?" I asked.

"Our caretaker. He has taken care of these grounds ever since I can remember. I cannot recall when Joyce was not with my uncle."

"Then the place is the property of your uncle?" I asked. "You do not live here?"

"Oh, yes!" he replied. "Yes, I reside here. It has been my home for the past few months. In fact, it has been in my possession for the last few years. I have been abroad."

"I see, and Joyce has been the caretaker?"

"He lived here alone a number of years," he answered.

"He does not seem to like this hedge?"

The doctor glanced up meaningly. His eyes were brown and clear and limpid with intelligence. He stroked his black beard with his finely manicured fingers.

"Do you blame him?" he asked.

"Then he has see something?"

"I wouldn't say as to that," he returned, "but he has certainly some rather weird stories to relate. At first I laughed at him. He is growing rather old, is Joyce. At first I construed it as his feebleness and his natural superstition. But now—really—I don't know."

"Then you, too, have seen something?"

"No, not that," he answered. "I have seen nothing, except perhaps the strange black servants. But I have seen the Master."

"Oh!" I exclaimed. "You know him."

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"Yes," he returned, "I have known the Master for a great many years. I have admired him. I think that every man of learning or worth must bow, somehow, to the Master. He always impresses me as being something that all of us should strive to become."

"You were surprised to see him?"

"I was. And from then on I have ceased to ridicule the trepidations of my gardener. I was glad to be of assistance to the Master."

"Then there was something you could tell him?" I asked.

"Well, yes. You see, there was some sort of mystery. I happened to know the owner of the house and some of his history."

"The owner of the house!"

"Well, I will not say that. Let me amend it. I refer to the former owner—I am not sure that he is now living."

"And this one—"

"Is Professor Witherspoon."

I could only exclaim.

"Professor Witherspoon?" I exclaimed. "You mean—"

"Just that. Professor George Witherspoon, of Bondell University; formerly professor of mathematics and one of my old instructors. He was one of the greatest scholars of his day and perhaps the most eccentric, a great, good man; but with a wisdom almost uncanny. In his own department and in his day his name was almost one to conjure with. He retired just a few years after my graduation."

"And that was—"

"Just forty-six years ago. I am an old man. I shall always remember. I myself hold a chair of mathematics. I can appreciate the sweep of the man's genius; he had an ability I could never attain to."

"You mean George Witherspoon?"

"Professor George Witherspoon," he corrected.

It struck me still with thinking, it was much more than I could understand, and it was too surprising. There had been something cumulative about the whole thing from the beginning; one mystery heaped upon the other in everlasting succession until it seemed entirely beyond lucid explanation. I could not account for it.

"You have spoken with the Master?"

"I have. It appears that there is a mystery about this place; some black shadow that hangs over it. You know how mathematicians reject superstitions. I had heard it all out of the silliness of Joyce's gabbling. He holds the place in a sort of terror. He swears it is haunted, and the abode of the devil. Imagine! Of course, I laughed at him. That is, until I met the Master. But now I do not know—"

"Then," I said, "the old gentleman has told you?"

"No. Not exactly. He asked me what I knew and I told him. Merely that. Among other things I spoke of the gibgerings of my gardener. He advised me not to laugh."

"And what did you imply from that?"

"Well," he said, "I presume you know the Master. At least I do. He is not one to stoop to foolishness. In the face of his advice I would not deride all the fears of my servant. Still, you know, I am a mathematician, a profession so hard and practical that it is almost brittle."

Now, through all his conversation, I was thinking. The sudden news had thrown a new light on things entirely. I remembered suddenly, with a start that was almost an inspiration. A word flashed in my mind, a word almost historic in poetic fiction, but in this case lucidly analytic. The word was *Faust*.

I recalled the story. A scholar, old, very learned and come to the portals of death without having tasted of a single pleasure of youth. His despair, his summoning of *Mephisto*, the covenant, and his metamorphosis into a youth of splendid beauty. George Witherspoon! Professor Witherspoon! I had the Master's own assertion. Yes. I had, through Roselle's letter, received it from the Rebel Soul himself.

Professor Witherspoon?

Was it possible that this one was George Witherspoon? My imagination leaped into full gallop. It vaulted over all possibilities and tales of fact and fiction, it grasped but one thing only, the portentous and mystic application of *Faust*.

For a moment. And then my mind came back to reason. It was not in the line of logic. I was a man, a human being, a citizen of the twentieth century; I refused to believe it. Nevertheless, it left me in a study. I now had three George Witherspoons and no other explanation.

But that was not all that was to happen. The day was destined to be of still more purport. Though all days here were overflowing, this was to be the most crowded one of all. I returned to the

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palace, passed over the portico, mounted the great stairway and entered the library.

CHAPTER XLVIII

ROSELLE ONCE MORE

THERE was no one there. The mute librarian was mooning about among the unending maze of book-shelves. The Master's table was much as he had left it; covered with neatly arranged stacks of parchment, manuscripts, and old volumes. My mind was still pounding on the riddle of the professor, there was no one about and no way to arrive at any explanation. I would await the Master; I would sit down at his table until his arrival.

For once I found something to read that I could understand. I am well educated, but as a rule the literature of the Master is so much above me as to be almost cryptic. Perhaps if I had studied Assyrian, Coptic, or some other uncouth language, while at college, it might have been different. I had noticed the wide scope of his reading and his apparent effort to link into one cosmic whole the dimness of the past and the indistinctness of the future. What I picked up was a psychology pamphlet by Professor Crellen. It was interesting.

I sank in the easy-chair and commenced reading. I was tired, and it was wonderfully refreshing after the excitement of the day to sit there in relaxation. I perused several pages. It was interesting, but—well, it was rather deep. My mind was not fresh enough to grasp deep thinking. The words began to drift together and I began dozing. Did you ever notice what a bliss there is between waking rest and perfect slumber? Before I was aware of it I was sleeping.

I woke with a start. Something with a musical high note had disturbed me. I was wide awake, but in that state when one still looks back into his dream for an explanation. As near as I could remember it was music, like a child singing. I remember the voice in all its clearness—my p l a y m a t e—George Witherspoon singing. I had had a dream, beautiful of sunshine, of my childhood. My heart thrilled to that strange exultation that comes to one only at the memory of one's boyhood.

But was it a dream? Somehow I felt that the air was still vibrating to the chords of that crystal music. There was a strangeness, a tingling, an ecstatic thrill that had shattered the talisman of the house's grim stillness. It was as if some innocent beautiful force had broken down the charm of the mystic silence.

"Ah!"

Then it was not a dream!

It was laughter, clear, childish, innocent. It was musical, undiluted, the clear bell-like ebullition that only comes from childhood. I could hear it reverberating in the hall, and the patter of little feet. There was a hurry, and a rush and an enthusiasm that could be no other's.

My mind rushed back to the days long gone when George Witherspoon and I had been playmates. I could see him coming in a swirl of happiness, rushing through the hallways singing, laughing, and finally bursting into the room with a storm of gladness.

What was this!

The door swung open. It was like the coming of the sunshine. A shrill of childish laughter.

The sapient silence of the great library tingled into music. A child was standing in the doorway. Beautiful, laughing, radiant; blue-eyed, golden-haired, irresistible. I half rose from the chair. I held my hand to my forehead. I could not believe it. It was—yes, it could be no other—it was my playmate, the George Witherspoon of my childhood; George Witherspoon four years old!

I could not speak. I merely stood there—waiting and doubting what I saw. Then there was a scurry and rush and an enthusiastic swirl of arms, and laughter. A great storm of happiness rushed upon me. I had him back. I picked him up—whether he was real or not—and covered him with caresses. There was no doubt of his reality—he was flesh, blood, and action, my own little George Witherspoon!

But in the confusion of the moment another note came to me, a voice, feminine and of familiar sweetness, a voice too welcome to be true. It was like all my dreams and wishes coming to fruition. A swish of skirts and a blur of color and I saw—Roselle!

"Walter!"

"Roselle!"

We both stood still; I holding the little George, and she in the doorway. I noted that she was beautiful, even more so than when I had last seen her. She had grown

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into the full maturity of a woman: and without losing a bit of her freshness. Her face had the color of a maiden's, plus the inexpressible tenderness of a mother. And yet she was the same—the shock of wavy black hair, the limpid beauty of her black, Spanish eyes, the red lips, the perfect features, the full bloom of her bosom. She rushed forward.

"Walter, Walter! What are you doing here?"

I think she wept a little. I could have done so myself, I was so happy. Perhaps I did, a tear of two at such a time is always welcome. She was all surprise and exclamation and wonder. She would scarce believe me real, she felt of my features, and ran her hands through my hair.

"Oh," she said, "it cannot be true. I have not seen you. You are not the real, true Walter. You are a dream, like all the rest; a shadow."

But I reassured her.

"There is nothing more alive in the world, Roselle, than I am. I am as material and as much of the flesh as you are, if indeed it is yourself."

She patted my cheek.

"Do not worry about that, Walter. It is I, true enough. But where is Georgie?"

IN THE excitement of our meeting he had slipped away. It was his inherited nature to plunge immediately into investigation. We could hear him talking. Then we both saw him. He had found the mute, and was plying the smiling black with questions. Even from where we stood I could see that he had quite overwhelmed him. There was an expression in the man's face that I had not noticed in all the days of our sojourn.

"He is like his father," I said. "Roselle, why did you not tell us? We never knew that you had a child."

"I wished to keep it, Walter, as a surprise for you and Clara. I never gave up hope of seeing you. The terrible thing must have an ending."

"You mean—"

"Oh, Walter, surely you know, you would not be here else—"

"I know nothing."

"The Master—the Master! Where is he? He must surely be here with you—and he knows."

"That I cannot tell you," I answered. "He has not told me. He brought me here some days ago, but has said nothing. It is all mystery."

She looked at me in a sort of wonder.

"Tell me," I said. "Do you know anything? Has he told you—has George Witherspoon spoken?"

She nodded. A strange fear came in her eyes, a fear that was a vengeance and a vengeance that was annihilation. The Spanish blood of her ancestors snapped warning.

"Yes," she said; "he has told me—all. It is here in this mansion" —she pointed to the door— "in the tower, the north tower—the Thing of Evil. I have come to kill him!"

She spoke dispassionately, as if beyond emotion, her words were icy. When a woman arrives at that stage there is not much that can thwart her. Nevertheless, I endeavored to caution.

"Have you seen the Master?" I asked.

But she shook her head. She answered calmly, and from her answer I knew that she knew what I meant to say.

"No, Walter, there is not time. There is not one minute to delay. I know I must save my husband. The time has come. Any minute it may be too late. It would be a million times worse than death!"

She turned her hand over suddenly. She was holding a tiny revolver. I grasped the fact and its meaning and I felt that it was my duty to restrain her. If she could only see the Master! He, and he only, knew how the thing was to be handled; and he would win, of that I was certain. I tried another tack. I would gain time until his coming.

"But, Roselle," I said, "would you kill, would you murder?"

Her answer was reproachful, almost scornful.

"Murder?" she exclaimed. "Murder? To kill a thing like that!"

"Then," I said, "if you have come on such a mission, why did you bring the child?"

She was a woman. The expression in her eyes showed that her calmness was, after all, hysteria. She dropped her hand and she shuddered.

"Walter," she said, "I do not know."

It was as I thought. I must above all things detain her until the coming of the Master.

And what held him? He was ever to be found here in the library; he had never been absent so long before. Should I not look for him? I could at least go to the door.

"Excuse me," I said, "perhaps I can

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find him. He will be here in a minute."

And I did just the one thing I should not have done. I left her.

Perhaps I could not have held her. But I should have tried. I should never have given her any opportunity while she was laboring under that cold hysteria. Perhaps, too, she was drawn, drawn as to a magnet.

I had just reached the door when she leaped forward. I say leaped because it was just that; she sprang with the lithe-ness of a panther. In her state of mind there was nothing that could stay her determination. Her tense mind had grasped, with the alertness of one crazed, the opportunity.

With a cry I endeavored to intercept her. I ran forward to intervene before she had reached the door of the tower. She was hysterical with a deadliness that bordered insanity. I knew it. It would be death or destruction for her to come to the lure of that venomous human spider. But I was too late.

She seized the knob and threw the door open.

It was as I thought. The Thing of Evil was there to receive her, as loathsome as a tarantula, and as terrible. In the lair of the doorway, with its black-dotted eyes of hatred and its distorted proportions, it was like a great magnified spider. It was luring, hypnotic, fascinating; it had drawn her. As she raised her arm it sprang forward.

Timid as I am, I could not endure it. I loved Roselle. This Thing should not have her. I leaped between them. And I reached and caught and fastened on its throat like madness.

OF THE whole thing I cannot remember. It was too lurid. I can only recall the cold resolve I had of throttling this Thing in its tracks. In my ears was the scream of Roselle and a sound of gurgling. I was clinging with the tenacity of death. In my mind was only the red of murder—to kill! Kill! Kill!

But something intervened. I felt my fingers pried apart. I did not even know where they were, nor what I was clutching. I heard some one speaking. It was like a voice coming out of a far distance. Some one I knew. I opened my eyes. It was the Master—the Master and Wilkins.

The Thing had staggered backward, one bony hand fingering at its throat and its terrified eyes upon the Master. Its mouth was working and I could hear its imprecations, a guttural snarl that was hellish and for all its fright, freighted with diabolic laughter.

At our feet lay the limp, inert figure of Roselle. It pointed with its lean, long, bony finger. Never shall I forget it—the "Ha! Ha! Ha!"—half whimpered and half triumph. Then it drew back, glowering at the Master. It trembled. It was gone. The Master closed the door. If only he had locked it!

Wilkins picked up Roselle. I assisted as much as I was able; but now that my unreasonable rage was gone, I was weak and trembling. When we had laid her on a couch the Master came over to us. He felt her pulse, placed a pillow under her head and crossed her hands over her bosom. She was still breathing, but hardly perceptibly; in a sort of coma. I spoke to the Master.

"Is she in danger?"

He eased her pillow.

"No, Walter. Not for the present. It is fortunate that you were here and made such a brave effort to save her. It was the only thing that you could do, and you did not hesitate. You diverted him by the fury of your onslaught, which from a man of your temperament was all the more unexpected."

Wilkins patted my shoulder and purred his congratulations.

"You don't know him, Master. He has the heart of a lion. He is the fly-weight champion of the world."

But I ignored him.

"Why, then," I asked, "did you not allow me to kill him? It would have ended all."

But the Master shook his head.

"No, Walter, it would not. To have killed him would have been a crime. It has been written by the Highest One of All that we shall not kill. We must save him. Even this one of evil. Most of all we must save George Witherspoon—yes, and the others, Roselle, and perhaps ourselves.

"Our mission is not selfish. We must do good even to the evil. And last of all, there is something which we would learn —a secret."

He spoke like the Master. After all it was not for me to doubt him. I was but a puppet in the inscrutable game that he was playing. Whatever the depths of his wisdom he was good and unselfish. One could ever have faith in the Master.

I had been impetuous and my very impetuosity had saved Roselle. But had he

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been more prompt, it would never have gone to the lure. Did he know that she was coming? I asked him.

In answer he drew out a letter.

"Yes, Walter, I knew," he said. "She had written. I went out to meet her, and I missed her. It came very near being fatal."

"She is in no danger?"

He glanced at the beautiful form.

"Not at present. She will come to no harm unless I fail myself. And I cannot fail. It may be fortunate. It is a harbinger of the end."

"In what way?"

"In this," he answered. "It will bring George Witherspoon. George Witherspoon is more powerful than us all. And he knows. Perhaps he watched it. He will come with the speed of lightning. And God help the ones who have harmed his loved ones."

The plural noun made me suddenly remember. The little one—where was he? It was Wilkins who relieved me; he pointed out of the window. The boy was on the steps, playing.

"He did not see it?" I asked, relieved.

"I do not think so," answered the detective. "We met him on the stairway. He was toddling down when we entered. That is why we hurried. The Master knew."

It was good to hear it. Somehow that little figure made my heart grow warmer. He was an assurance of his father, the same child of laughter; he was innocent, he was proof, after all, that the other was but mortal and would come to redemption. But the Master was speaking.

"I wish just one word, Walter," he was saying, "with you and Wilkins. And I wish to commend you for your patience and to advise that you remain patient. It is a case that is not for violence. We have come to the crisis. It is to be either myself or this Thing of Evil, as you call it. George Witherspoon or destruction. I had not looked for a test so soon. I figured on time and endurance. But what must be, must be."

He pointed to Roselle.

"George Witherspoon is coming. She will bring him. She is to him of more meaning than all the forces of evil. When he does come this whole mystery, I hope, will be snapped asunder." He placed his hand upon my shoulder; his voice grew tender. "And I think, Walter, that we will have back the George Witherspoon of your childhood, the real George."

He spoke to the detective:

"And remember, Wilkins," he said. "No violence."

CHAPTER XLIX

THE ONE MAN

WHAT he said was good to hear. The excitement of the past few days, the dangers, the lurking sense of the occult, the unexpected sequence of events, together with their weird setting, had tautened my nerves almost to breaking. I could not have stood out much longer. I must know all, all; and the secret. Who was George Witherspoon? What was he? And what was this power of evil? I was strained to the endurance of expectancy.

And the next few hours perhaps would end it! You can imagine my feelings. I was thrilling with impatience, my heart clutching with varied fears. The end! What was it?

Nevertheless, I descended to the park with Wilkins. At the behest of the Master we went out and took the little George under our guidance. I was very glad to do so. To be near him, to see him, to hear him was like an omen out of my childhood. He was the child George Witherspoon come back again.

To have him with me was one of the strangest and most unexpected turns of the whole affair. It was like going down into the sunshine, back into the years to my boyhood. I quite forgot that he was the child of Roselle, and the other. The resemblance was so perfect that I could feel of him only that he was my playmate.

And I was an old man! Rather, I was an old young man. What a difference there was between us! Even the father, the real George Witherspoon, was a lad beside me. He was young, perfect, splendid, not one muscle had been withered. Time had not touched him. He had found the blessing of the fountain of youth and the fortunes of *Fortunatus*.

Yet I did not envy him. I only wished him back into redemption. The mystery that surrounded his personality would be lifted. He had been taken to the Mountain. His own words. In his being lay some great and unknown secret. A man above all men, a being above all law who obeyed but self—the Only Man! He had said it. The only man on earth! He could not be lying, and yet I felt that it could not be so.

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And this other; what was he? Clearly George Witherspoon was his master. They were so apart in their personalities that there might be a universe between them. And for all that, they were one. What was the thing that bound them? My answer told me—the one thing for which the Master was striving—the secret.

And last of all the musician. Ever I came down to that. It was the one thing that unbalanced the equation. How to account for him? The one fact that ever upset all my long-thought-out solutions. I could get nowhere. The mystery had grown so deep, so shuffled, so inextricable as to be unending. It was not a mystery at all, but an impossibility. So I spoke to Wilkins. It was natural that I sum up all on the eve of denouement. He listened in calm silence. Finally he spoke.

"Do you doubt, Mr. Warren?"

"I did not say that," I returned. "I said that I do not know."

He spat out a piece of his unending cigar.

"Well," he said, "I know. This George Witherspoon, Rebel Soul, *Mephisto,* king of thieves, baron, prince and what-not is getting into action. And the Master knows it. His wife is up yonder. His wife! And God pity the one who did it. Nothing would surprise me now; fire, earthquake, tempest, end of the earth, or doomsday. I have still got one safe bet: I've got my money on *Mephisto.*"

But the child must be taken care of. He was hungry and wanted to see his mother.

"What shall we do?" I asked Wilkins.

"That'll be easy," he answered. "Take him down to the dining-room, fill him up, and turn him over to one of the fables."

But I would not do that.

"Well, let him eat, anyway. With his stomach full he will want to sleep. Then we can take him to his mother."

Which is what we did, and when the little head had dropped in sleep Wilkins bore him up the stairway and placed him tenderly, for all his roughness, beside the unconscious form of his mother. There was something about it impressive, even to the detective. He was all reverence; he could not resist their beauty.

"Warren," he said, "for that pair who would not fight the devil? I don't blame *Mephisto.* The Master was right. He is coming, and when he—hello, what is that?"

It was a hissing sound, low, strangled, tremulous, like one coming who was out of breath. It came from the rest-room, a sound of but one identification. There was but one being in the world who could so voice hatred. Wilkins' eyes went to slits as he listened to the sound, then he nodded.

"His nibs, getting in his licks on the Master. On a bet. Do you get it, Warren? It's the Waterloo of the occult. He's going to get the Master first; then he can tackle *Mephisto.*"

He drew out his automatic.

"Come," he said.

I touched his shoulder.

"Wilkins," I whispered, "your gun; the Master's orders; remember—no violence."

He nodded.

"That's all right," he answered, "up to a certain point of endurance, but he's going to put nothing over on the Master. If he does he dies, even if he is the devil. But I shall not lose my head, so don't worry."

Again the sound. We stepped over cautiously, Wilkins leading. The door was open. From a point by the window we could get a full view of the strange scene being enacted—the great oak table, the carpet, the somberness of the walls and fixtures, and the two old, wise men.

They were, as usual, seated opposite each other. The table happened to be lengthwise from the door, so we could catch their profile; or rather the side view of the one and the full face of the Master. I crowded close to Wilkins, with a pulsed alertness. He pressed me to a chair beside a table.

There was not a word spoken, nor a whisper. It was a moment of culmination; a silent static climax of the occult. I sensed it and so did Wilkins. The whole scene—the silence, the two old men; the weirdness—was fraught with triumph or disaster. The final scene to a long, long drama: a great victory or a great defeat—the thing of evil or the Master. A battle. Good or evil, George Witherspoon, my own happiness, the life of Roselle, all at stake.

It was a conflict of tremendous forces, of two wills that had been trained to concentration, of two spirits, two contrasts. The air was charged and portent. I could feel its magnetic contact. I was not afraid, but my mind was tautened to the tremulous edge of hysteria.

To relieve myself I glanced out of the window. The far blue waters, tinted with

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the golden sheen of the afternoon sun; the rim of beach with its surging lace foam; the green landscape, the leafy live-oaks, the ribbonlike stretch of highway, the park and the garden. Outside all the sunshine, light and brightness; inside somberness and mystic shadow.

Was there ever such a contrast! Between them was all the vast prosaic plain that reposes between reality and imagination; the unmeasured distance between the material objective and the illusive unknown subjective. It was like a vast dream from which I could look out upon plain, waking realistic daylight.

And out of the corner of my eye I could see the two antagonistic wise men, the two masters, the champions of sin and virtue. The one stooped over, black and ugly, distorted; his talon hands clenching and reclenching and his black eyes gleaming and scintillating with rising venom; the other calm, serene, with the settled repose of kindness. The one striving for wickedness, action, and for battle; the other unconscious, apparently, that such an evil one existed.

It was a conflict of forces, of the greater things in mankind, the last final strife of the two opposite primal elements of human thought. It was the ultimate conflict between love and hatred. They might be fighting for the world. It was symbolic.

I could take it all in at a glance. The broad highway, the park, the ocean; the room shadowed, mystic, surcharged with conflict of the two wise men. And to one side reposing the forms of the unconscious Roselle and the little George.

My heart was beating to tumultuous pulsings.

Just then Wilkins clutched me, his fingers, pressing with the thrill and feeling of one who had just heard a sound from heaven. I, too, heard it; and I held my breath, lest I desecrate by the slightest sound the sacredness of its music.

It was the musician!

It was weird and holy, like a soul coming out of the darkness, a chant of victory, a triumphant welling of melody that was like the voice of love itself; growing louder, coming out of the distance swinging with the cadence of all emotions—the greatest thing in all the world—purity itself!

THE Master heard it. At least, he smiled. The assurance and confidence of his face redoubled. He went on about his reading, selecting with nonchalance a leaf from the pile of parchment.

But it was not thus with the other. The strains of music seemed to drive him into madness. Perhaps it was his last endeavor; the great climax of his desperation.

His whole form quivered now, then grew taut and rigid; he crouched and wriggled like a cat settling for a spring, the focus of his eyes condensed to pin-points, the unholy fire blazing to a white heat of anger.

I could not move. The music had died away. Never was hatred so centered into murder.

Then it seemed to me that he began to grow, his whole head magnified to eyes like fireballs. Perhaps it was my fancy, or the terror that was upon me; perhaps, too, I myself had been drawn into the maw of the hypnotic demon. I was trembling, inert, useless.

Just then I felt Wilkins' reassuring hand upon me. He, too, was tense, his hand gripping the automatic. But it brought me back to presence and to reason. It was good to have that spell broken. It was like the passing of terror. The form had risen.

Risen? I cannot quite describe it. It was lithe and noiseless, like the spirit of a cat. It raised from its chair and stood erect. It was terrible, black and distorted; unholy, evil. From beneath its black robe it had drawn a flamelike kris that gleamed with a thousand scintillations. It hesitated and glared with gloating intent on the nonchalant, serene form of the Master.

Hesitated? For but an instant. It gloated anticipatory murder. The Master did not move. It clutched the edge of the table with one hand and with the other talon closed about the kris stalked along the side. I could see the grim, cord-like fingers gripping the hilt tight as death. It was about the table and was directly behind the Master. The knife quivered with its deliberate elevation. Wilkins raised his automatic. I closed my eyes.

It was too much. I dared not witness it.

I held my breath while I waited. It seemed an age. And at the moment there broke again the weird notes of the strange musician. Somehow it seemed to me that in those strains was all the goodness of the earth concentrated. It was not music, but inspiration; a soul melo-

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died into sound. Now I opened my eyes.

I heard the heavy articulated breath of Wilkins.

"God!"

It was a tense moment. Wilkins had not fired, but he had seen that which had rocked him into emotion. The Thing had slouched backward. Whether it was the music or the aim of the detective I do not know. But it was quivering; the hand that gripped the weapon, so firm before, was now quivering as with a palsy. Its eyes were tremulous with hesitating terror.

For a moment. Then it sank into its chair. It turned about as if to get settled and once again resumed its glaring.

I looked at Wilkins. His gray eyes were cold as marble. He nodded.

But I looked still farther; the turning of my head brought into view the whole panorama of the landscape. I could have shouted. I clutched Wilkins by the arm and pointed.

"Look, look!" I called. "Look! Look! There, what is that upon the highway?"

And what was it? It was a sight to stir one's blood. What we had looked for.

The whole highway from hedge to hedge on either side was choked with people. A mob. And it was coming with a fury that only a mob can attain in its madness. It was pursuing, rushing, swirling, pellmelling in a thunderous incoherence. The rumbling of the thousand feet was like the approach of an earthquake. It was writhing, turning, rushing, a very storm of oncoming humanity.

What was it? What was it all about? What were they pursuing? Then I saw.

A lone figure far out in the lead. He was rushing up the highway with the speed of the wind. Never before had I seen a man run like that. He was bareheaded, his hair was golden. I would have known him in a million—George Witherspoon!

Never shall I forget it. I stood there by the window; Wilkins clutching me by the arm. I could hear him breathing. Behind me lay the unconscious form of Roselle, and the conflicting wise men; and over it all floated the flooding symphony of the weird musician. It was a

One George Witherspoon lay on the floor, inert as in death. The other was like him, yet he lacked the fire of the Rebel Soul we knew

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crisis of many actors, vivid and indistinct—a blur of action.

The lone figure turned in at the gate. As he did so there was a roar and a rush of the throng behind him. It was like a great wild monster. There were screams and moans and shouts and clamor. It was alive and it was insistent; it was deadly.

And then—I heard it. The shrill of a siren and the roar of an unmuffled motor. The mob split open; and out of it plunged like a thing relentless a great car bearing an officer.

Witherspoon was in the driveway.

The car turned in between the pillars. There was no doubting the intention. The chauffeur turned straight upon him. He was going to run him down. The officer was standing erect and pumping with his automatic. George was still running. I could see the bullet splashes dusting into the pavement.

Would he make it? For once I breathed a prayer for George Witherspoon. He was coming to Roselle, to me, to the Master.

But just then something happened. The chauffeur was coming head on with relentless murder. It was done like lightning. George leaped sidewise, reached, caught and swung on to the running-board and in a second of thought had the officer by the collar.

It was incredible—a blur of action. The form of the policeman spun into the air and landed in a mass of shrubbery. It was too quick for thinking; before I had ceased watching the officer the body of the chauffeur was flying after him.

The car was still going. George grasped the wheel and fairly shot it to the steps of the castle.

I heard Wilkins' exclamation.

"Leave it to *Mephisto!*"

CHAPTER L

THE TWO GEORGE WITHERSPOONS

WHAT a moment! The mob was rushing across the grounds with a typhoon fury. A door swung open; and there was a rushing blur of nimble feet upon the stairway. Another door opened and George Witherspoon stood in the doorway.

Never shall I forget him. He had all the greatness of a god, and all the fluttering of dissolution. He was great, wonderful, beautiful; his form erect, defiant, with the grace of an Apollo. He was the most nearly perfect man I had ever looked on. And yet—I could see it—he was coming to the end. I could sense it, could feel it; it was stamped in his eyes. Whatever he was or whoever he was, he was coming to the crisis of his existence.

There is nothing so impressive as this—a great oncoming to destruction. The fall of the mighty is ever tragic. He was power; something above man, coming to the end. And he was meeting it with the fitness of his station, battling, defiant, unconquerable. It was the quality of his spirit that he be to the end a rebel. He was the Rebel Soul!

He did not falter. Though he looked straight at myself and Wilkins he saw not. In his eyes was not a fleck of indecision. They were inspired, set, hardened. With quick, decided steps he crossed the intervening space of the library. He stood in the door before the two old men.

I could hear the mob rushing up the steps. It was like the bursting of an inferno; the clatter of feet, the falling of furniture, the deafening clamor and the roar.

Wilkins clutched me. But he had no need. I could see it all. It was the last act of madness, the last dark deed of a thing accursed. The Thing had sensed the moment. It was its last and final stroke. It was to be fatal. It had sprung upon the Master; its wicked eyes flaming with climaxed malignancy and the evil blade descending.

But the stroke never landed. The form of Witherspoon darted forward. It was like the lightning.

A scream!

The most unearthly screech of terror that ears have ever heard; inarticulate, but for all that vivid! I can hear it yet.

"George, George! Have mercy!"

But mercy there was not. Witherspoon had it by the shoulders, holding it above his head. It bit and spat and struggled; it fought and the foam flecked from its mouth in its fury. It was impotent; it had come to its destruction. By the hands of its creation it was being borne to a sudden death.

There was not a moment to be wasted. The mob was upon the stairway. Its fury was like the typhoon's striking. Its maw was agape for bloodshed—for the blood of George Witherspoon.

It was like his genius to go down so in defiance. He had lived alone in his greatness; he would be greatest of all in his death. What cared he for the mob

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lust? He was titanic, alone, isolated—he would stampede them. It was the climax of his being.

In two strides he was across the library.

The door swung open. The multitude was swarming up the stairway. He defied them. In his arms was the wriggling, gnashing, snarling Thing of Evil. They were seeking bloodshed; but not the bloodshed of defiance. As of old he cowed them by the sheer daring and preponderance of his genius. They hesitated and hung back in wonder. And then—

It was like a catapult. He gave the Thing a turn about his head and sent it hurling. He threw it full into their faces. There was a roar and a streak of flying legs and bodies; curses, clamor, and shouts of terror. The body cut a narrow lane, struck against a curving banister, bounced sidewise and fell inert, a mass of broken bones and rags against a side wall.

It was the end of the Thing of Evil. And—it was the end of George Witherspoon.

I saw it and sprang forward.

With the very act, even while watching the hurtling body, his spirit seemed to wither. It was the last act of rebellion; the culmination. His eyes were dimmed of luster, his body shaking, his knees sank forward and he fell, face downward.

With a cry, I knelt beside him. I could not believe it. I could hear the Master speaking to the multitude; I could hear Wilkins swearing.

It was an end I would not have—to lose George in such a death. Was this to be the reward that I had looked for—the end of all our labors? We were to have solution. I prayed, from the days of my manhood, for his redemption, and now it had come to this, to the grim, terrible solution.

With a sob I turned him over. His face was still beautiful, but his mouth was set. His form was limber. I straightened out his limbs and opened his shirt-front. I was frantic for the least faint sign of animation. My mind was full of antagonism and determination. I—I would not have it; he could not be dead. I would force him, bring him back out of the shadow. I listened—at his breast—and I heard—

A hand touched me. A hand soft and light as velvet. It was upon my shoulder, I could hear the Master speaking in his calm, cool manner to the throng upon the stairway. And I could hear Wilkins:

"Well, I'll be—"

From the tone of the detective's voice there was something that he could not comprehend. He ever spoke thus when some new phrase of the impossible confronted in this case of mystery. What new thing had happened?

The hand upon my shoulder pressed lightly, then gently but firmly, as one will when in question.

It distracted me for a moment even from the one before me. There was something about it insistent; an interrogation. I glanced up and over my shoulder. And I sprang backward!

It was George Witherspoon!

Impossible?

But it was so. There were two of him. Two! One upon the floor, supine and helpless; the other standing by the body, beautiful, hallowed like a spirit risen. Each was even as the other; only one was dead and the other living. It was too impossible for believing and too spectral. But it was so.

It was natural that I should recall and should watch this strange one.

In his hand was a violin. He was the musician. His face was tender and his eyes mellowed with the strange softness that is inspiration. He was not like others, but more like one stepped from the clouds. There was a noble loftiness in his manner, and a sympathy and tenderness that was childlike.

He was watching with undisguised curiosity the scene upon the stairway; the strange, puzzled throng, the shifting expression of the faces as each one, under the calm, kind words of the Master, returned to sanity and to reason. His eyes flitted, first to the stairs, and then to the old man speaking. His hand was upon his violin, his brow puckered with interrogation. I remember his words; they were soft and mellow.

"Pray, gentlemen," he was saying, "what is this all about?"

JUST then a man emerged from the throng; he was evidently a new arrival. From the manner in which it opened to allow for his passage it was evident that he was a personage of some distinction. Then I saw. He was the officer who had escorted us to our hotel on the day of our peril in the city. And, strangest of all, he had behind him another who claimed my still older acquaintance—Simpson.

The lieutenant spoke to the Master,

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shook hands and at a nod from the old man turned to the others. It was evident that he had their respect, for a few words finished the work begun by the Master and they began to file out of the building.

He turned about.

"Some day," he commented, "I am going to take up the psychology of the crowd. It is the most remarkable trait of human nature. It is half monkey and all brute, a sort of game of 'Follow the Leader.' It is most interesting and of wonderful possibilities, if we but stop to think. I have often said 'that, give me the psychological moment and I could overturn an empire with a dog-fight.'

"Take these fellows for instance"—he waved his hand—"they do not know one thing they are after; merely a fight, and Witherspoon fleeing through the city. But what is this? Ah!"

For the first time his eyes encountered the two Witherspoons; the one standing erect and handsome, alive; the other lying prone, inert as in death. A puzzled look swept over the features of the lieutenant.

"Well, what is this? I was well acquainted with George Witherspoon, but I am sure there was but one."

And even Simpson stepped forward, stooped over the prostrate form, and then looked up and gazed at the other. The look that he turned to me was incredulous. He shook his head.

"What is the meaning of this, Mr. Warren?"

I looked at the Master.

He alone, of all of us, was unperturbed. The calmness and quietness of his look betrayed his satisfaction. He nodded kindly and stooped to the form upon the carpet. He spoke to Wilkins.

"If you will give me a hand we will place him on a couch. There, gentlemen. He is rather heavy."

Which he was.

The four of us—Wilkins, Simpson, the live George Witherspoon, and myself—picked him up. He was a well-knit man; and we were solicitous not to hurt him.

I remember how strange it was to see the live George Witherspoon assist in lifting the other. But I could sense, too, that however alike in appearance there were worlds between them. This one was peace; there was placidness and composure in his eyes, a strange quietness, the serenity of the student. He had not the fire of the other, the virility, the electric personality, nor the vigor, half-devil. They were alike, but antithetic.

We placed him on a couch. The Master lifted up his head and pushed a pillow under it. Then he turned and, with a calm step, crossed over the library to the inert, beautiful form of Roselle.

He said nothing; and it was very strange to see it. He merely touched her, and she had awakened. She looked up in a sort of wonder; but for all that expectant. There was no surprise. She gazed up at the Master and arose quietly. It seemed to me like one waking out of peaceful slumber. Which no doubt it was.

The Master selected a chair, but she refused it. She stooped down before the couch and threw her arms about her husband. She did not sob. A tremor ran through her body, but that was all. Then she kissed him, tenderly on the lips, with all the love of a woman. She turned to the Master.

"Master," she asked, "you say it; it is well?"

He patted her on the shoulder.

"It is well, Roselle, it could not be better. In a moment you shall have your husband."

So there were two. That moment sealed it. It was the instinct of a woman; she had gone straight to the body. The other she had not deigned to notice.

But what was to be the explanation? We were soon to have it. The Master spoke.

"Gentlemen, if you will be seated I will explain the whole mystery."

CHAPTER LI

THE MASTER EXPLAINS

"IT IS a strange tale," he began, "but one which, if I keep out of technicalities and abstruse terms, can be explained very briefly. And I shall endeavor to tell it simply.

"To begin with, it had its conception in a man; and its derivation in the most abstruse of all our sciences; the science of metaphysics.

"The man himself was Professor George Witherspoon, at one time the professor of mathematics at Bondell University and in his day one of the greatest and most honored scholars of the world.

"Primarily he was a mathematician; that was the chair he held; and the science through which he attained his renown and standing. As a man he was a splendid type, and respected and re-

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vered by all who knew him. He was considered a good man and kindly, and there is no doubt but that, at the time, he well merited the esteem.

"But he was not only a mathematician. Like Descartes and a great many other giants of the most exact science, he had a leaning as well to the speculations of philosophy. Perhaps this may be explained by the fact that metaphysics is first of all a problem. It is the one great thing which has never yet been explained; the problem which has never yet had a definite solution.

"It is natural with some men to chafe when there is no answer. It was so with Descartes, so with the great men who came after, and it was so with Professor Witherspoon.

"It may be well for me to go a bit into philosophy.

"To begin with, the whole science has almost from the beginning been divided into two separate, distinct channels. They are the two conflicting schools of speculation. The first, which is designated as the sensational, rests everlastingly and without stint upon materialism as its bulwark. The second is idealism, and the name speaks for itself: it teaches if not boldly, at least by its spirit, the mystery of man.

"Sensationalism can be classified by its name and defined. It is heartless in its contention, and withal almost irresistible in its logic. Its name is its definition—sensation. That man is nothing more than material and that mind is nothing but a fleshy mirror for experience, is the doctrine on which it stands. We know nothing except through our sensations: our five senses are the five molten streams that run into the crucible of mind. We are fleshy, earthy, nothing else; even as the tree and the mushroom. When we are dead we are—dead.

"One school is the antitheses of the other. Even as the first stands on the material, so the other bulwarks itself with spiritual and the ideal. It looks higher. It refuses to believe that man is a mere block even as wood or stone; but something higher; that in him is the secret of animation and that this secret is man himself and would make him live forever.

"The two schools are ever in conflict. It is the old struggle of Bacon and Descartes, with a million alterations, come down to us, still with the same essentials.

"Nevertheless, there have been some concessions. It is of the idealist that we are speaking. They have granted the groundwork of the other—which indeed they cannot deny—that mind is sensation. But they have done so with certain reservations. To the brutal mushroom philosophy of the others they have opposed a line of thought which has now come to be almost universally accepted, even by psychologists and physiologists.

"Every man, they say, has two separate and distinct minds—the objective and the subjective. The objective has to do with sensation, experience of life. The subjective with the inner being, consciousness, reflection, *et cetera*. In other words, that, although the objective furnishes the material and experience for thought, the subjective makes the classification. It is the finer distinctive essence, the greater thing in man, which makes for individuality, character and, in the last and final sense, his spirit.

"Of the two minds it is much the stronger; but, although stronger, it is, strange as it may seem, hardly at all under control of the individual. We might classify it as impulse; it is that great hidden thing which we might call inspiration, genius, the real spirit itself.

"We see it flashingly illustrated in the exploits of our great men. In the exact ratio as a man can control his subjective mind he becomes greater than his fellows. It is self, greatness, and the future of mankind. Which brings us back to Witherspoon.

"Professor Witherspoon was an idealist; and he was a man of wonderful ability. Every moment that he could spare was given to speculation. There was a great, great unsolved problem—and he would solve it.

"But he would not work toward it as had the others. The immense library of sophistry and words through which he waded filled him with disgust. He believed in solving, not talking. He was a scientist, and believed in being exact. If a man had such a thing as a spirit he would find it; talking would get him nowhere.

"He was a man of great wealth. He resigned his chair and set out on the quest that has but just reached its queer culmination. He would solve the subjective and get down into the inner secret of mankind. It was a secret of God; but not forbidden for man to seek for. He would find it.

"His quests took him to many and far places. Years went by. He visited strange

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corners and queer people. He was forgotten, he became an old man. But at last he found it.

"In a far-off corner of northwest China, he ran across the remains of a civilization that had been old, old, and gone to decay even before the Chinese, ancient as they are, had been thought of. He found his secret. When he came back to America he was perhaps the most learned and potentially the most powerful man, that the world has ever known.

"Naturally, he was happy. He was elated and in high spirits to think that all his labors and persistence were at last come to such a splendid culmination. He was bearing back to mankind the great secret which would make the world great, hopeful, and an infinitely better place to live in. He was bringing to philosophy the real truth that it sought for.

"He was going to take a man and throw him into the infinite. By a certain power of hypnosis which he had acquired he would throw a man a million years ahead in his evolution. That is, in the evolution of his mind. The unknown subjective, which was lying inert and almost useless to a man of today, would come under his control. Such a man would be all genius. It would be a hope and a glory for the future of mankind. With such a proof he would enable the philosophers to bridge over the million years of the future.

"He hastened eagerly to the Society for Metaphysical Research.

"He was an old man. For years he had sacrificed everything for one idea. It had become himself, his very being; it was himself, his all. His life had come to a wonderful fruition.

"But alas for Professor Witherspoon!

"He was laughed at. He was old, so old, that he seemed a hundred. The men of his generation had died and gone and withered by the wayside. He was forgotten. A few of his auditors remembered a certain Witherspoon who had held a chair of mathematics, but he had not been a metaphysician.

"This quack was an impostor. It was spiritualism and reeked of the medium. Whoever heard of metaphysics getting down to concrete illustration? It might do for puerile chemistry, but for lofty speculative philosophy—never. Besides, what would become of all their literature, of Bacon, Plato, Descartes, Hobbs, Hume, Kant, Cousin, Mills and all the rest who had told the truth?

"If what this man told was the truth, there would no longer be need for speculation.

"IT WAS almost brutal. The old man had given all his life. He had sacficed everything, and now that he came with his pearls he was casting them before swine.

"It turned him. His whole individuality shriveled. The very unexpectedness and ingratitude distorted his reason. He had asked nothing for himself, only a hearing.

"They had laughed, called him a fake, an impostor, a medium. He went to madness.

"But his madness was peculiar. It was hatred. All the goodness was warped out of his being; the virtue that was his was perverted into rancor. The man who would be a blessing to humanity would be its curse.

"He had come out of his long pilgrimage with his secret and had laid it at the feet of the wise men. They had laughed. They were fools. He would show them. The power that was his was unabated. With his hatred and rancor, his madness went to cunning. He was a thousand times more powerful than any man living and more dangerous.

"He retired to his home. With uncanny shrewdness he laid his plans. He hated man, hated himself, was hatred itself personified. He had the craftiness of a madman and the total lack of mercy. He would have revenge that was total. He would destroy the race entirely.

"How would he do it?

"He had his secret. He would take one man and throw him into the infinite. He would create such a power for evil that not a thing could stand against it. Such a man would be irresistible; he would be genius and a genius of evil. There would be two of them; himself, with all his power, and his creation.

"Against such a combination of forces a world of men still in the process of evolution and still tied down to objective materiality would be as nothing. It was with secret gloating evil that he went about his purpose.

"He had a grandson, a young man of splendid attainments and a musician. As his heir he had been carefully educated. It was to be expected that a Witherspoon would be a scholar. Had the old man been normal he would have derived an inestimable gratification in

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the genius of his grandson. As it was, he saw in him but an instrument.

"It was easy. He soon had the young man in his power and for the first time had the satisfaction of beholding an actual living proof of his wisdom. But it was not all gratification. He had hoped for vigor, living fire, and action: a being who in his very intensity and swing of his genius would be half-devil. And he got—a saint.

"The young man was a musician. Though the professor could throw him into the infinite, he could only develop the inward quality of his mind. Instead of a being, flaming and consuming, he had before him a musician—the greatest the world has known, almost beyond conception, and whose music was like a note from heaven.

"It was wonderful and interesting, but it was not what he had hoped for. Such a one could never assist him. He was disappointed.

"But he would not desist. He was more positive than ever that if he had the right one, a man with the proper virility and genius, he could work his fell purpose. And this brought him to our own George Witherspoon.

"They were distant relatives. By a coincidence he was in appearance somewhat like the professor's grandson. He had life, vigor, genius, fire, and action.

"The youth loved pleasure; and he had a recklessness that ever goes with warm, vigorous blood and the spring-time. He made an appointment and they soon came to an understanding. And with his marvelous powers, Professor Witherspoon was able to so change his expression—yes, his body—that he and the other George Witherspoon were like twins.

"In the language of George Witherspoon himself, he was taken to the mountain. And though it was a figurative expression it was almost so. It was an uncanny compact. The young man was to have everything—life, youth, splendor, genius; he was to have the wealth of all the world—wine, woman, song. It was characteristic of him that he chose everything. He was to have one wish, but he chose—all.

"The old compact of *Faust* and *Mephisto*.

"The result was the superlative even of the old man's wildest dreaming. I doubt whether such a one will appear again on the earth for a million years. He was genius—and inspiration. He had perfect control of his mind and body. He was conscious of his spirit. He used his brain as he wished it, likewise his body. He was subjective.

"To him the outside world was but a place to live in. The objective realities about him were but means for his pleasure. He brought circumstances to his will and wishes; he ruled the objective. He had powers that were almost spirit.

"He has taught us and proved it. Man is greater than all. He is the ruler of his own destiny; a being who goes onward.

"Such a one was the creation of Professor Witherspoon.

"In a way it was like *Frankenstein* and his monster. He was the product and the conception of a genius. And it had the same sequel.

"The old man was evil. He took good care that his evil permeated the genius of his pupil. He would have him as himself—an avenger.

"And George Witherspoon did not care, he was busy enjoying himself and trying out his powers. We all know what he did in the beginning to Walter Warren. He discovered his control of spirit, and was so uncanny as to be almost impossible.

"He undoubtedly had many strange adventures, and with his power almost worked miracles. There are many things that he could do that we with our practical present day knowledge find difficult of credence. He was as much above us as we are above the ape-man of our ancestors. He was a forecast and a promise of the future of mankind.

"I will not say that we are to evolve into Witherspoons. We may be something very different. But it is certain that we are but started on the pathway of evolution.

"The compact that they made, promised to come to its dreadful fulfillment. George did not care. The other was all evil. Both had an infinite contempt for feeble mankind. Both were selfish; they were the entire compass of all that is wicked. Never was such a pair upon the earth for man's destruction.

"But strong as it was, and all comprehending, the philosophy of Professor Witherspoon was built upon the sand.

"George Witherspoon was still a man; for all of his scintillating genius, for all of the facts of his evolution he could not get away from the irrevocable laws of nature and of God. There is nothing that can transcend them. The love that is instilled in man cannot be killed. It is

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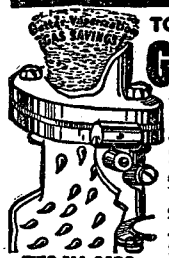

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the secret and magnet of all his thinking. It is the pivot-wheel of all existence.

"It was here that the evil, designing professor made his one mistake. Like all wise men grown old and past the youth of passion, he was prone to regard it lightly. It was but an exhilarating form of selfishness, a foolishness that deserved but the contempt of the learned. He was evil; he would meet this little thing by affording his creation every form of wantonness. He would wear him down until he was surfeited into reason.

"Which shows that he knew not love.

"The time came when George sought the love of a noble woman. It is a blessing which comes to every man at least once in his lifetime. And George Witherspoon was a man, for all of his evolution. He found Roselle.

"THE beginning of George Witherspoon's love was the beginning of the end. Even as his spirit had been intensed and magnified by his evolution, so was his love concentered a million. His love was all. It was a flaming thing that was the very climax of sacrifice and denial. No man could love as he; from henceforth he could not be evil. He was the Rebel Soul no longer, but a soul repentant.

"The battle came. It was inevitable. It was to be one or the other. The professor beheld all his edifice of destruction smashed into a huddle. All his plans and dreamings and plottings of evil had been wrecked by a frail, beautiful girl. His mind was crazed. He would have revenge; he would rain his wrath on his own creation, destroy the woman and begin all over.

"But he was hopeless. Like *Frankenstein,* he had made too well. George Witherspoon was a million times more powerful than his creator. He was out of the infinite; and the professor, whatever his powers, was after all, no more than a twentieth century man. He could not even release him. George battered down his defense and held him powerless.

"Nevertheless, he would not give up. If he could not touch the man he would destroy the woman. The battle raged. Which is where we ourselves came in.

"Our task was simple. We must save George Witherspoon; and we must destroy the other. But neither one, in this case, must come to violence until we had reached the end. To have killed the professor would have left George Wither-

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spoon still the Rebel Soul. Had the latter been brought to an end it would have been plain and downright murder. We must overcome the one to free the other. Which is what we did.

"It was a long, hard battle. It came to an end in a crisis. The one of evil overreached himself as we thought for. He struck at Roselle. The end came quickly. It brought George Witherspoon. The power of the other shattered. At the moment when the Thing of Evil filtered out of life at the foot of yonder stairway the Rebel Soul departed from George Witherspoon. The spell was ended."

"Then—" I began.

But the Master held up a warning finger.

The form quivered, turned over as if sleeping. Then a querulous, hesitating hand was raised to his forehead. And I saw it; his eyes were open.

I am afraid that I gave a cry in my emotion. It was a great truth coming to fulfilment. It was the old George, my George; the George of my childhood!

I shall never forget his hesitation nor his look of wonder.

He looked up at me queerly.

"I have been sleeping," he said. Then: "Why, how old you are, Walter! You should be a boy, even as I am. What is it? Your hair is gray. Have I not been sleeping? What has happened?"

I grasped his meaning. The years of his intervening evolution had been blanked; he was even as he had been on the night of his metamorphosis.

"Tell me, George," I asked. "You remember nothing? You have had no dream?"

"A dream? Yes, yes, I have had a dream. A wonderful one, and a long one. And I dreamed of a woman. A beautiful girl who saved me from some strange and terrible evil. She was my wife. I would that I could have her. I can almost see her. Ah—what is this?"

He looked down at the one kneeling by the couch. His wondering hand touched her. What was it?"

The form of Roselle nestled and quivered. A beautiful arm stole about his neck. And her face was lifted.

We are such stuff
As dreams are made on,
And our little life
Is rounded with a sleep.

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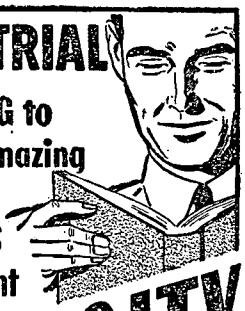

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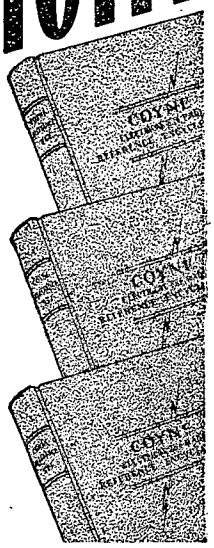

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The Readers' Viewpoint

(Continued from page 10)

I think it was the second issue you printed, and which contained the first part of "Conquest of the Moon Pool." I must have this copy to complete my file, and that gaping space is keeping me awake nights. Mr. Maurice Richter recently supplied me with three back numbers, and by wheedling and conniving, I eked out three more here and there, so, kind brethren under the flag of fantasy, leave me not with one niche in my collection unfilled!

Now to plunge into my enthusiastic raving about F.F.M. It goes without saying that your magazine stands head and shoulders above the field. In fact, I would go so far as to say it is the finest collection of stories ever printed over a series of issues in any magazine. It is indeed a rare and wonderful privilege to read the old masterpieces by true geniuses. Although Lovecraft and Hall are truly great writers, masters indeed, they are overshadowed by one. Of course this is the superb, the unmatchable genius with words and fantasy, the greatest living writer, Abraham Merritt. Without question, he stands alone in the field, and I believe some day his magnificent phrases and sense of the breathtakingly unreal, yet living world of fantasy will be recognized as some of the most beautiful writing the pages of literature has ever known.

For sheer strength, beauty and glory of composition, greatness of plot, what other author can point to such novels as Merritt's? The true cloak of genius enfolds Mr. Merritt, and he has a worthy companion down the halls of fame in Virgil Finlay, that master illustrator of the bizarre, the weirdly, hauntingly beautiful realm of fantasy. He and Merritt shall walk down the corridor of the ages to come as models for all the rest.

NEIL H. SHREVE.

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We shall continue to give you great stories by great writers.

"ELIXIR" GREATEST OF ALL

Just a few words of praise for past issues of F.F.M. and a few suggestions for future selections.

You know, when I completed the "Darkness and Dawn" trilogy I arrived at the conclusion that George Allan England was a very capable author, but not until I read "The Elixir of Hate" did I really appreciate him. This statement may seem to be a bit haywire, what with Merritt, Hall, and Stevens appearing in your pages, but this same "Elixir of Hate" is the greatest story published in your twenty-five issues. An absolutely novel plot that to my knowledge has never been imitated, told in the very best manner, with a powerful conclusion which though tragic is beautiful.

This story caused me to seek others of the author's works and although I've quite a col-

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lection of Munsey magazines, the Cavalier's and All-Stories are quite scattered.

I also add my voice to that of Raymond Washington, Jr., asking for the "Ark of Fire."

Thanks for the finest magazine; it's tops.

RUSSELL GALE.

Box 222,
LEEDEY, OKLA.

NO POETRY PAGE, PLEASE

Fantasy stories seem to be the main diet in F.F.M. However, I'd like to see a real science fiction story preferably by Stanton Coblentz.

As for a poetry page, I'm against it. The letter column is as good a place as any for the inclusion of poetry. Also, I wish the editor would give a few detailed answers to the letters or else revive the "Editor's Page."

How about trying Frank R. Paul on a cover; or better still get Elliot Dold! Finlay's cover for "Polaris—of the Snows" still remains in my memory, however.

H. LOREN SINN.

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ON THE OCT. ISSUE

"The Elixir of Hate" in the October F.F.M. was excellent. The characters were well developed, and the whole story showed careful work on the part of England.

Paul's illustrations were good, but this type of story really belongs to Finlay. Paul is best on the type of story done by E. E. Smith, and he would be masterful on the "Skylark" series.

Haven't read "Into the Infinite" yet, as I seldom read serials until I have them complete. Looks good, though, and Finlay does himself proud on the illustration.

Forgot to comment on the cover; it hardly needs it. A symbolic Finlay can't be beaten. Keep 'em coming.

CHAD OLIVER.

3956 LEDGEWOOD,
CINCINNATI, OHIO

POEM FOR "THE DWELLERS"

Enclosed is a "Ptarek" "pome."

The final stanza does contain a thought I hope Merritt would ponder. In "The Dwellers in the Mirage" he stressed the breaking of the screen and powdering of the ring, as if to emphasize that now the god was walled out for good. But did he forget that the wrinkled old priest in the Gobi oasis had a ring, too . . . smaller than Dwayannu's, but effective just the same, and was it not proven

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that the Gobi screen was an effective entrance for Khalk'ru? A good sequel could thus be written!

"PTAREK."

Dwayannu and Lur
By "Ptarek"

Flushed red with his wine and love of Lur,
Dwayannu lifted his cup and swore—
By the Greater-Than-Gods he swore it . . .

"Yodin by Khalk'ru eaten shall be,
"Sirk's ramparts scaled and the city sacked;
"Together we'll rule the Aejir, Witch!"

Her eyes grow soft, her lips are a-smile,
As she dreams of heart's desire attained . . .
On her visioned throne no place for *him!*

But things fall out as the gods decree,
And not as the plans of men are made—
Sirk falls and Yodin dies . . . Lief awakes!

Ah, Lur, your dream is over and dead,
Your vision faded and out of reach—
Sri's vengeful blade already is flung!

The white wolf whines and dies on her breast,
Tubalka's hammer the screen smites down,
Smashing the gods and the throne of Lur!

But the Touch of Khalk'ru does not fade,
The haunted Gobi still holds his ring . . .
Soon or late the god will summon Lief!

A REQUEST

I have been reading the mag. F.F.M. for about nine months and I want to say I am more than satisfied with the stories, pictures and covers. Also the Readers' Viewpoint. I am trying to get all the back issues of the F.F.M. from Nov., 1941; also want to get as many of the old mags. that contained Edgar Rice Burroughs' stories. Anyone who has any of these stories for sale, please let me know.

FRED DEBLOU.
112 BRAUN AVE., HIGHLAND PARK,
NEW BRUNSWICK, N. J.

COMPLETE STORIES ONLY!

Your magazine is truly very popular with fantastic fiction readers. Just the mention of having several extra copies of the earlier issues in my last letter to you brought me a flood of letters asking for prices. If there are any other of your new readers and fans who need any issues from Sept.-Oct., 1939 to May-June, 1940, I can now supply them at very reasonable prices, as I have accumulated quite a supply of them.

"Creep, Shadow!" by Merritt was one of the finest stories it has ever been my good fortune to read. Merritt has no real rival in the field of fantasy. His descriptive ability is amazing.

"Into the Infinite" is another welcome addition to your pages. However, I am definitely opposed to the serial in your magazine, as I

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dislike saving issues until the story is complete.

Why not announce a special extra copy to feature "Moon Pool" and send a copy of same to all fans who reserve that issue?

ROBERT E. ROACH.

1252 W. 80th ST.,
CHICAGO, ILL.

MERRITT INSPIRES

Well, now that you've printed one of my letters, I guess I'll try again. The September issue contained the first story I'd ever liked by Cummings. "A Brand New World" was good, but I didn't like it so well as "Creep, Shadow!" I noticed a letter from Ptarek in the Viewpoints. I like his idea. At least it would be unique and different. Since I'm supporting the idea, there's a poem included with this letter for Merritt's "Creep, Shadow!"

I see all the fantasy fans are taking nicknames. I guess I'll call myself Joel.

If anyone needs any science fiction books or mag. (F.F.M. only) then write to me and I think I can fill your wants.

I see where "Raym" wants "Ark of Fire." I'd use it. It's a good story.

Can anyone tell me if Kline's "Swordsman of Mars" and "Outlaws of Mars" were ever printed in book form?

Here's that poem!

CREEP, SHADOW!

Creep, Shadow, hunger, thirst,
Through the ages fast,
Only shadows in the dark,
Until your time is past.

But twice in time the witch was foiled.
One broke the encompassing bonds,
And she, the sorceress of the sea,
Against him every enchantment toiled.

Yet when the raging sea was calm
She was dead by Shadow's hand
And he, the victory in his palm,
Stood with his love upon the land.

JOE HENSLEY.

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FAMOUS FANTASTIC MYSTERIES

A FAN FROM FIRST ISSUE

I have read F.F.M. ever since it's first publication (including F.N.) and haven't missed one of them. You have a mag. that is unique; there is not another mag. in the field that is even a close second.

I hope that I live long enough—and longer—to enjoy the rest of F.F.M.—every one of them. The price is just right.

It would be some job were I to try and describe all of your stories in F.F.M. that I read, so all I can say is that they are all swell.

I advise against the republication of Merritt's "The Conquest of the Moon Pool" and "The Moon Pool"; these are recent publications and many of the readers have them on hand. You could possibly publish them as a side-line for those that ask for them.

SIDNEY PLOTKIN.

SCRANTON, PA.

"ZITU" A GEM

I have just finished the Nov. issue of F.F.M., and, as usual, am sending you my opinions regarding it.

The "Mouthpiece of Zitu" was a grand old gem of fantasy. J.U. Giesy has a style of prose that is somewhat startling. He always shows a genius for description and narrative, and always makes interesting reading.

You really had a swell short story. I never knew that Robert W. Chambers wrote fantasy, though I have read his historical romances. He's surprisingly good. Let's have many more like it.

"Into the Infinite"? Ahhh! There is your gem. I don't suppose I'll ever get over the way George Witherspoon goes about the world, regardless of human tradition, morals, laws. The narrative runs along so smoothly that one is not aware of the words or the time. The development is so subtle and so gradually wrought into the main idea, that, well, the idea slips into the brain just like an oyster down an unsuspecting throat.

The Readers' Viewpoint was interesting, as always. I particularly enjoyed the poem "For the Horla."

DAVID MILLER.

306 COLLEGE ST.,
VALDOSTA, GA.

NO "MOON POOL" COMPLETE

It hasn't been often that I have raised a protest in regard to anything that "my" publications have contemplated or have been in danger of contemplating and therefore possibly doing. But certain letters have been requesting the republication of A. Merritt's "Moon Pool" and "The Conquest of the Moon Pool" in one volume. Now I'm going to protest this for the following reason or reasons:

First: I read the "Moon Pool" as a novelette in the All-Story Weekly back in June, 1918. In February, 1919, "The Conquest of the Moon Pool" began and I, of course, read that. I still have them in my files.

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THE READERS' VIEWPOINT

Second: Later, about 1926, Amazing Stories published the two as one story and I again read them.

Third: You published in September, 1939, "The Moon Pool"; in November of the same year you published "The Conquest," both in Famous Fantastic Mysteries. These are also in my files.

Now, dear editor, I am a Merritt fan of the first water and I hope that I can say that I have everything of the best that he wrote—they are priceless as far as I am concerned. But don't you think that there are thousands of your readers like myself who would lose out on a whole month's magazine if these stories were republished?

In all fairness I can't blame the fans who want them again of course.

I wonder if we couldn't have another portfolio of Virgil Finlay. Another one of some of the later illustrations would be very appropriate and would very nicely augment the portfolio already out.

Well, here's luck to FAMOUS FANTASTIC MYSTERIES and the many mystery fans who read and write for "Readers' Viewpoint." I read that as much as I do the famous reprints.

Thank you for reading this protest and remember that I am and will always be a friend of F.F.M.

WILLIAM E. BYRD.

2048 37th ST., N.W.
WASHINGTON, D. C.

A TOPS MAGAZINE

Enclosed please find money order for a year's gift subscription of my favorite magazine, namely FAMOUS FANTASTIC MYSTERIES.

Please start subscription with the October issue so my friend will be able to enjoy "Into the Infinite" in its entirety. I only wish that you published another similar magazine so I could purchase it for both my friend and myself. When you are ill a long time you appreciate a tops magazine.

I wish to secure Merritt's "Moon Pool" series complete, either magazine or book form.

MRS. D. W. E. HASKELL,
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HE HAS BACK ISSUES

I have issues of the Argosy from 1904 to 1920, the All-Story from 1910 to 1920, and the Argosy All Story from 1920 to 1930 that I have been collecting with the idea of completing the fantastic stories contained therein. Since you are now reprinting these same stories, I would like to dispose of same.

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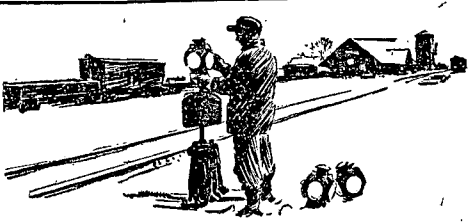

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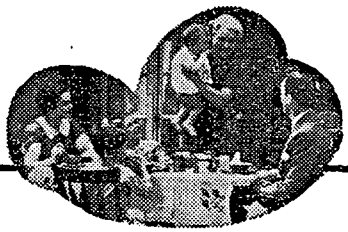

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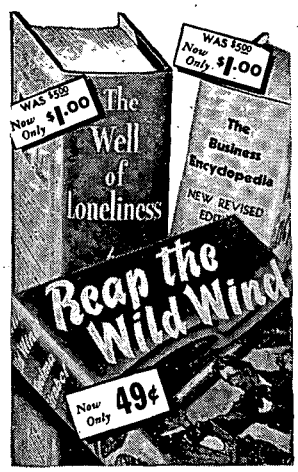

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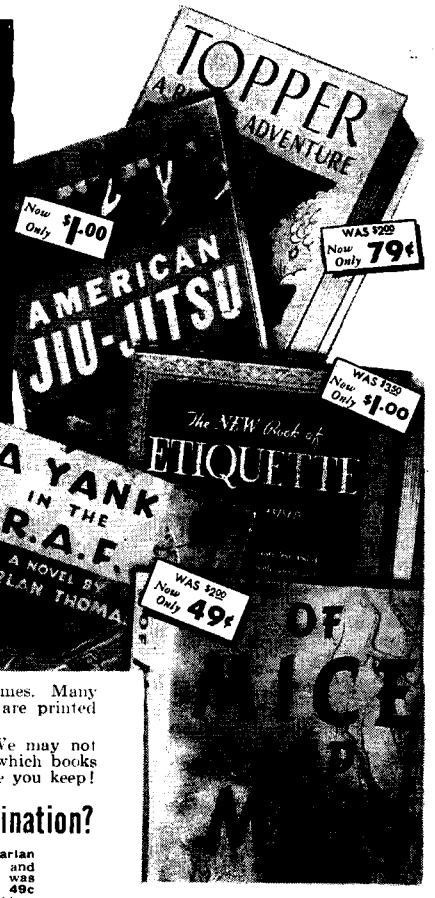
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